SATURN

MAGAZINE OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION

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THE BIG TERRARIUM
by
JAMES SCHMITZ

DAMON KNIGHT. MILTON LESSER. CHARLES EINSTEIN

SATURN

MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE-FICTION

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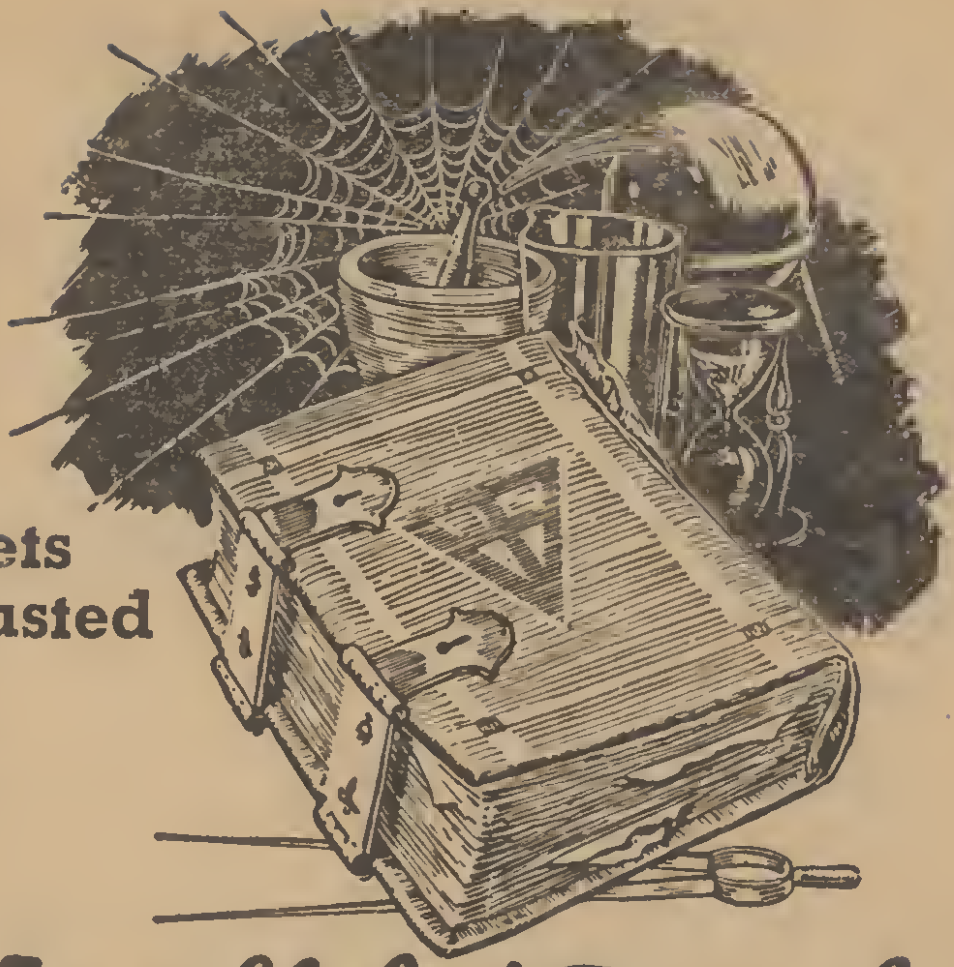

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THE BIG TERRARIUM

by James Schmitz

They called it "The Little Place" because it was just like Fred's farm back on Earth—only where his fence ended it became strictly "out of this world!" And in spite of the incredible weather and the floating Eyes, it could have been bearable if it weren't for the Things Fred had to share it with!

A "DIFFERENT" NOVELETTE

THE THIRD morning Fred Nieheim woke up in the Little Place, he no longer had to prove to himself that he wasn't dreaming. He knew where he was, all right, along with the rest of them—Wilma and Ruby and Howard Cooney and the Cobrisol. But knowing it didn't make him any happier!

He remained lying on his back, gazing moodily out through the bedroom window, while he wondered how one went about getting back to Earth from here—specifically, to the Nieheim farm twenty-two miles south of Richardsville, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. It wasn't apparently just a matter of finding a way out through the very odd sort of barriers that fenced in the area. According to the Cobrisol, a local creature which appeared to be well-informed, they would then simply be in something known as "Outside," which was nowhere near Earth. At least, the Cobrisol had never heard of Earth, and still wasn't entirely convinced that it existed.

"Sometimes, Fred," it had hinted gently only last evening while they sat together on the front porch, watching a rather good production of an Earth-type sunset above the apple orchard, "sometimes the memory and other m e n t a l functions are deranged by transfer from one Place to another. Don't let it worry you, though! Such effects almost

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always wear off in time. . . ."

Fred felt Wilma stir quietly in bed beside him, and he raised himself cautiously on an elbow to look at her. The bed creaked.

Ruby went, "Chuck-chuck!" sharply from the corner of the bedroom, where she slept in a basket. She was a middle-aged hen pheasant of belligerent nature, who regarded herself as the watchdog of the Nieheim farm. Basket and all, she'd been transferred along with them to the Little Place.

Fred remained quiet until Ruby stuck her head back under her wing. Wilma was still asleep, and only a rounded, smooth shoulder and a mop of yellow hair were visible at the moment above the blankets. They had been married less than two years, and if he and Wilma and Ruby had been set down here alone, he mightn't have minded it so much. The Cobrisol had assured him that one ordinarily received the best of care and attention in the Little Places; and the Cobrisol itself, though disconcerting in appearance until you got used to it, seemed to be as agreeable a neighbor as anyone could want.

Unfortunately, there was also Howard Cooney. . . .

OUT IN the kitchen, precisely as Fred's reflections reached that point, a metallic clatter announced that Howard Cooney was manipulating Wilma's big iron skillet on the stove again.

Fred scowled thoughtfully. For a recent acquaintance, Howard certainly was making himself at home with them! He was a tramp who had happened to select the night of their transfer to sleep in the shed back of the Nieheim farmhouse; and so he'd been picked up and brought along, too. Unfortunately, whoever or whatever had constructed a reasonably accurate duplicate of a section of the Nieheim farm in the Little Place, hadn't bothered to include the shed. The first night, at Wilma's suggestion, Howard had moved into the living room. After that, he'd stayed there.

Fred felt he couldn't reasonably object to the arrangement under the circumstances, but he suspected that Howard was an untrustworthy character. He'd already begun to ogle Wilma when he thought nobody was noticing—and there

was the disturbing fact that he was considerably bigger and huskier than Fred....

He'd better, Fred decided uneasily, work out a method of getting them all back to Earth before Howard got the wrong kind of ideas!

"MORNING," Howard Cooney said hospitably, as Fred came into the kitchen. "Sit down and have some hoot. Where's Wilma?"

Fred said Wilma was still sleeping.

"Me," said Howard, "I'm up with the sun! Or what goes for the sun around here. Know what? I'm going to build a still!" He explained that he'd discovered a maze of piping under the front porch which wasn't connected to anything and which he could use for the purpose.

Fred doubted Howard would have any success with his dubious project, but he didn't comment on it. The piping wouldn't be missed. The duplicated house functioned just as well as the house back on Earth had; but it was operated on different and—so far—incomprehensible principles. Hot and cold water ran out of the proper faucets and vanished down the drains, but neither faucets nor drains appeared to be connected to anything but the solid walls! Similarly, the replicas of the electric stove and refrigerator performed their normal duties—but Fred had discovered by accident that they worked just as well when they weren't plugged into the electric outlets. It was all a little uncanny, and he preferred not to think about it too much.

He tried a slice of the hoot Howard had been frying. Hoots came in various flavors, and this one wasn't at all bad—quite as good as ham, in fact. He said so.

"Could have been a famous chef back on Earth if I'd wanted to!" Howard admitted carelessly. "This is last night's hoot, by the way. There weren't any fresh ones floating around this morning."

"Howard," said Fred, "I'm trying to think of a way to get us back to Earth—"

"You are?" Howard looked startled and then frowned. "Look, Buster," he said in a confidential tone, leaning across the table, "let's face it. We got it soft here! Once I get the liquor situation straightened out, we'll have everything we need!"

Fred's mouth opened in surprise. "You don't mean you want to stay here all your life, do you?"

Howard eyed him speculatively. "You ought to wise up! You never been in stir, have you? Well, that's where you are now!"

"It's more like a zoo!" said Fred. "And—"

"Call it a zoo," the tramp interrupted. "Same principle." He shrugged his massive shoulders. "Trying to break out is a good way to get killed, see? And it's likely to make it rough on everyone else. You wouldn't want something worse than being shut up here to happen to Wilma, would you?" He grinned amiably at Fred, but the little gray eyes were shrewd and, at the moment, a trifle menacing.

There was just enough sense in what he'd said to make Fred uncertain; Howard seemed to have had some experiences which could be of value now. "What do you think we ought to do?" he inquired.

However, at that point, Howard became rather vague. In stir, he said, one had to take things easy until one had figured out the system. And then one made use of the system. The danger was in getting whoever was in charge of the Little Place riled up by thoughtless action....

GOING IN search of the Cobrisol after breakfast, Fred admitted to himself that he couldn't quite make out what Howard Cooney was after. The tramp seemed to have something definite in mind, but apparently he wasn't willing to reveal it at this time.

At any rate, he'd made it clear that he didn't intend to be helpful about getting them back to Earth.

He found the Cobrisol coiled up at the head of a sloping section of ground which apparently was intended to represent the upper half of the south meadow of the Nieheim farm on Earth. As such, it was a few hundred yards out of place, and the grass that grew there wasn't exactly grass either; but Fred didn't pay much attention to such arbitrary rearrangements of his property any more.

"Nice day, isn't it?" he remarked, coming up.

"If you're speaking of the weather, yes!" said the Cobrisol. "Otherwise, I'll reserve my opinion."

Fred sat down beside it. "Something wrong?"

The Cobrisol nodded. "Possibly...!" It was a quite odd-looking creature, with a snaky, ten-foot body, brick-red in color and with a rubbery feel to it, and a head that was a little like that of a pig and a little more like that of an alligator. No arms or legs, but it didn't seem to miss them. When it moved slowly, it extended and contracted itself like an earthworm; when it was in a hurry, it slithered about in sideways loops like a snake. "Take a look around!" it invited significantly.

Fred gazed about. There was the usual, vague sort of sun-disk shining through the overhead haze, and the morning was pleasantly warm. At the end of the meadow was a huge, vertical something with indefinite borders called a "mirror-barrier," inside which he could see the Cobrisol and himself sitting in the grass, apparently a long distance away, and the duplicated farm-house behind them. To the left was a rather accurate reproduction of the Nieheim apple orchard —though the trees were constructed more like firs—complete with a copy of the orchard section of the Nieheim trout stream. Unfortunately, no trout appeared to have been transferred.

Beyond the orchard was a thick, motionless mist which blended into the haze of the sky. The mist was another barrier; the Cobrisol called it a "barrier of confusion." The first day, Fred had made a determined attempt to walk out of the Little Place at that point; it had been a confusing experience, all right!

THERE WASN'T much more to the Little Place. Behind the house, the ground sloped uphill into another wall of mist. He could hear Wilma and Howard Cooney talking in the back garden; and a number of small, circular objects that looked as if they might be made of some shiny metal floated about here and there in the air. The Cobrisol had explained that these were Eyes, through which the goings-on in the Little Place were being observed. Their motion seemed aimless, but Fred hadn't been able to get close enough to one to catch it.

"Everything looks about the same to me!" he admitted at last.

"*Every*thing?" repeated the Cobrisol.

Its long toothy jaws and rubbery throat moved slightly as it spoke, though it wasn't actually pronouncing human words. Neither had Fred been talking in the Cobrisol's language, whatever that was. It was a little hard to understand. They hadn't been suddenly gifted with telepathy; it was just that when you were set down in a Little Place, you knew what the other intelligent creatures there wanted to say. And it sounded as if they were using your kind of speech.

Fred had given up trying to figure it out....

"Well, there aren't any hoots in sight this morning," he acknowledged. "Or robols either!" he added, after a brief search of the meadow grass. "Howard Cooney mentioned the hoots were gone at breakfast."

"Very o b s e r v a n t of the Cooney person!" the Cobrisol stated drily. It and Howard had disliked each other on sight. "Fred, there are a few matters I feel I should discuss with you."

"Now's a good time for a chat!" Fred said agreeably.

The Cobrisol darted its head about in a series of rapid, snaky motions, surveying the area.

"The Eyes," it remarked then, "have assumed an unusual observational pattern this morning! You will note that two are stationed directly above us. Another cluster has positioned itself above the roof of the house. Early in the morning, an exceptionally large number were gathered among the trees of the orchard. These have now largely transferred themselves to the opposite side of the Little Place, near the maze-barrier."

"I see," said Fred, wondering what it was driving at.

"The One who maintains this Place is showing a remarkable degree of interest in us today!" the Cobrisol concluded.

Fred nodded.

"VERY WELL," the creature resumed. "Life in a Little Place is usually very satisfactory. The Ones who maintain them can be regarded as hobbyists who take a benevolent interest in the life-forms they select to inhabit their creations. Whereas Big Places, of course, are designed for major scientific projects...." The creature shuddered slight-

ly throughout its length. "I've never been in one of those, but —well, I've heard stories! Until this morning, Fred, I was inclined to regard us here as exceptionally fortunate life-forms!"

"Well," Fred said, frowning, "I don't quite agree with...what do you mean, 'until this morning'?"

"There are indications that this Place is being maintained, shall we say, carelessly? Nothing conclusive, as yet, you understand. But indications!" The Cobrisol jerked its head in the direction of the mirror-barrier. "That barrier, for instance, Fred, and one or two others have been permitted to go soft overnight!"

"Go soft?" Fred repeated.

"They're no longer operating as barriers. If we chose to, we could go right through them now—and be Outside! An almost unheard-of example of slip-shod maintenance—"

Fred brightened. "Well, say!" He got hurriedly to his feet. "Let's try it then!" He hesitated. "I'll go get Wilma and Ruby first though. I don't like to leave Wilma alone with that Cooney character!"

The Cobrisol hadn't moved. "I'm afraid you don't have the picture," it remarked. "You assume that once you're Outside you'll be able to find your way back to the place you call Earth?"

"Not exactly," Fred said cautiously. He didn't like to be evasive with the Cobrisol, but he wasn't sure it would want them to leave—and it might be in a position to make their departure more difficult. "We could just step through and look around a little...."

"Even if we weren't under observation at the moment," the Cobrisol pointed out, "you wouldn't live very long if you did. No life form—as we know life-forms—can exist Outside! The barriers are set up to keep us where it's safe. That's why it's so irresponsible of the One—"

Fred abandoned the idea of taking Wilma with him. He'd have to make a careful check first. "About how long," he inquired, "could I stand it out there, safely?"

"Forget it, Fred!" the creature advised him earnestly. "Unless you knew exactly what to do to get back into the Little Place, you'd be worse than dead as soon as you stepped out there! And you don't."

"Do you?" Fred challenged it.

"Yes," said the Cobrisol, "I do. But I won't tell you. Sit down again, Fred."

Fred sat down thoughtfully. At least, he'd learned a few new facts, and the knowledge might come in handy.

"A few moments ago," the Cobrisol said, "you made an interesting statement! It appears that you don't wish to leave Wilma alone with the other human?"

Fred glanced at it in surprise. "No," he said shortly, "I don't."

THE COBRISOL hesitated. "I don't wish to be tactless," it remarked. "I understand many species have extremely rigid taboos on the subject—but might this have something to do with the process of procreation?"

Fred flushed. He hadn't got quite that far in his thoughts about Wilma and Howard. "In a general sort of way," he admitted.

The Cobrisol regarded him judiciously. "Wilma is a charming life-form," it stated then, somewhat to Fred's surprise, "whereas the Cooney is as offensive as he is ignorant. I approve of your attitude, Fred! How do you intend to kill him?"

Shocked, Fred protested that he didn't intend to kill Howard Cooney. Human beings didn't act like that—or, at least, they weren't supposed to.

"Ah," said the Cobrisol. "That is unusual!" It reflected a moment. "To get back, then, to our previous subject—"

"What previous subject?" By now, Fred was getting a little confused by the sudden shifts in the conversation.

"Hoots and robols," the Cobrisol said tersely. "They don't just fade away—and there were enough around last evening to have kept us all supplied for another week. What may we deduce from their sudden disappearance, Fred?"

Fred considered. "They got sick and died?"

"Try again!" the Cobrisol told him encouragingly. "We could still *see* a dead hoot, couldn't we?"

"Something ate them!" Fred said, a trifle annoyed.

"Correct! Something," added the Cobrisol, "with a very large appetite—or else a number of perhaps less voracious somethings. Something, further, that was transferred here

during the night, since there was no shortage in the food supplies previous to this morning. And, finally—since it's given no other indications of its presence—something with secretive habits!"

Fred looked around uneasily. "What do you think it is?"

"Who knows?" The Cobrisol had no shoulders to shrug with, but it employed an odd, jerky motion now which gave the same impression. "A Gramoose? An Icien? Perhaps even a pack of Bokans...." It indicated the observing Eyes above the house with a flick of its snout. "The point is, Fred, that the One appears curious to see what we shall do in the situation! Taken together with the softening of the barriers, this suggests a deplorable—and, for us, perhaps very unfortunate—degree of immaturity in our particular hobbyist!"

FEELING his face go pale, Fred got to his feet. "I'm going to go tell Wilma to stay in the house with Ruby!" he announced shakily.

"A wise precaution!" The Cobrisol uncoiled and came slithering along beside him as he strode rapidly towards the house. "The situation, incidentally, does have one slight advantage for you personally."

"What's that?" Fred inquired

"I have noticed that the Cooney individual is considerably larger and more powerful than you. But you can emphasize to him now that, since we are in a state of common danger, this is no time to indulge in procreational disputes...."

Before Fred could answer, there was a sudden furious squawking from Ruby in the back garden. An instant later, he heard a breathless shriek from Wilma and a sort of horrified bellowing from Howard Cooney. He came pounding up to the front porch just as the house door flew open. Howard dashed out, wild-eyed, leaped down the porch stairs, almost knocking Fred over, and charged on.

Fred's impression was that the big man hadn't even seen him. As he scrambled up on the porch, there was a thud and a startled "Oof!" behind him, as if Howard had just gone flat on his face, but he didn't look back. Wilma came darting through the door in Howard's tracks, Ruby tucked firmly under her left arm and a big iron

skillet grasped in her right hand. Her face looked white as paper under its tan.

"Run, Fred!" she gasped. "There's something at the back door!"

"You're mistaken, Wilma," the Cobrisol's voice informed them from the foot of the stairs. "It's now coming around the house. Up on the front porch, everyone! You, too, Cooney! No place to run to, you know!"

"*What's* coming?" Fred demanded hoarsely. He added to Wilma, "Here, I'll hold Ruby!"

Nobody answered immediately. Howard thumped up the steps, closely followed by the Cobrisol. It struck Fred then that it probably had been a flip of the Cobrisol's tail that halted Howard; but Howard wasn't complaining. He took up a stand just behind Wilma, breathing noisily.

The Cobrisol coiled up on Fred's left.

"It's an Icien.... Well, things could be worse—listen!"

Ruby clasped under his left arm, Fred listened. A number of Eyes were bobbing about excitedly in front of the porch. Suddenly, he heard footsteps.

They were heavy, slow, slapping steps, as if something were walking through mud along the side of the house. Fred turned to the edge of the porch where Howard had been pulling up plankings to find material for his still. A four-foot piece of heavy pipe lay beside the loose boards, and he picked that up just as Wilma and Howard uttered a gasp of renewed shock....

Something—the Icien—was standing behind the south end of the porch!

"Ah!" it said in a deep voice, peering in at the group through the railings. "Here we all are!"

FRED STARED at it speechlessly. It stood on two thick legs, and it had a round head where a head ought to be. It was at least seven feet tall, and seemed to be made of moist black leather—even the round, bulging eyes and the horny slit of a mouth were black. But the oddest thing about it was that, in addition, it appeared to have wrapped a long black cloak tightly around itself.

It marched on to the end of the porch and advanced towards the stairs, where it stopped.

"Are all the intelligent in-

habitants of the Place assembled here?" the inhuman voice inquired.

Fred discovered that his knees were shaking uncontrollably. But nobody else seemed willing to answer.

"We're all here!" he stated, in as steady a voice as he could manage. "What do you want?"

The Icien stared directly at him for a long moment. Then it addressed the group in general.

"Let this be understood first! Wherever an Icien goes, an Icien rules!"

It paused. Fred decided not to dispute the statement just now. Neither did anyone else.

"Splendid!" The Icien sounded somewhat mollified. "Now, as all intelligent beings know," it went on, in a more conversasional tone, "the Law of the Little Places states that a ruling Icien must never go hungry while another life-form is available to nourish it...." The black cloak around it seemed to stir with a slow, writhing motion of its own. "I am hungry!" the Icien added, simply but pointedly.

UNCONSCIOUSLY, the humans on the porch had drawn a little closer together. The Cobrisol stayed where it was, motionless and watchful, while the monster's black eyes swiveled from one to the other of the petrified little group.

"The largest one, back there!" it decided shortly.

And with that, what had looked like a cloak unfolded and snapped out to either side of it. For a blurred, horrified second, Fred thought of giant sting-rays on an ocean bottom, of octopi—of demonish vampires! The broad, black flipper-arms the creature had held wrapped about it were lined with row on row of wet-toothed sucker-mouths! From tip to tip, they must have stretched almost fifteen feet!

Howard Cooney made a faint screeching noise and fainted dead away, collapsing limply to the porch.

"Ah!" rumbled the Icien, with apparent satisfaction. "The rest of you may now stand back—" It took a step forward, the arms sweeping around to reach out ahead of it. Then it stopped.

"I said," it repeated, on a note of angry surprise, "that you may now stand back!"

Ruby clacked her beak sharply; there was no other sound. Fred discovered he had

half-raised the piece of pipe, twisting it back from his wrist like a one-handed batter. Wilma held the big skillet in front of her, grasping it determinedly in both hands. Her face wasn't white any more; it was flushed, and her lips were set. And the Cobrisol's neck was drawn back like that of a rattlesnake, its jaws suddenly gaping wide.

"What is this?" The Icien glanced at some of the Eyes floating nearby, as if seeking support. "Are you defying the Law?" it demanded.

No one answered; but Fred realized, in a rush of relief which left him almost weak enough to follow Howard's example, that the monster was licked! It withdrew its horrid flippers slowly, letting them trail on the ground, while it shifted its weight uncertainly from one thick leg to the other.

And then Ruby burst into a series of raucous, derisive sounds that made everyone start nervously, including the Icien. The Cobrisol closed its long jaws with a snap. The Icien snorted, wrapped its flipper-arms back about itself, turned and stalked off toward the apple orchard. Its feet were huge and flat like the flippers of a seal, Fred noticed, which seemed to account for the odd, sloppy sounds it made with each step.

At the edge of the trees, it turned again.

"This matter is not settled!" it rumbled menacingly. "But for the time being, the stream back here and the trees are my personal area. You will enter it at your own risk!"

Its voice and appearance still made Fred's skin crawl. "We'll agree to that," he answered hoarsely. "But you'll leave that area again at *your* own risk!"

The Icien gave him a final, silent stare before it moved on into the orchard.

They began to revive Howard Cooney....

ODDLY enough, Howard seemed more sullen than grateful when he woke up finally and realized the Icien was gone.

"If it hadn't been for my weak heart," he growled, "I'd have clobbered the devilish creature!"

"An excellent suggestion," the Cobrisol remarked approvingly. "You'll find it sitting in the trout stream, Cooney...."

Howard g r u n t e d and changed the subject. Within

an hour after their encounter with the new neighbor, all the Eyes had disappeared from the area, indicating that whoever was using them didn't expect anything of interest to happen now. But the hoots and robols were back in normal numbers.

Apparently, a crisis had been passed! The only thing remarkable about the next day was that the weather turned hot and dry. The night wasn't much of an improvement, and by noon of the day that followed, it looked as if they were in for a regular Earth-style heat wave.

Wondering whether this meant that summer was now on the Little Place's calendar, Fred rigged up a makeshift hammock on the front porch, which seemed to be the coolest spot around the house. While Wilma gratefully napped in the hammock and Ruby drooped in a corner with a pan of water near her half-open beak, he sat on the front steps putting an edge to their two largest kitchen knives. He'd fastened the knife-handles into longish pieces of piping the afternoon after the Icien showed up; they made quite formidable looking weapons.

But he wished they were all safely back home again.

Glancing up presently, he discovered the Cobrisol in the meadow, moving slowly toward the house. Howard Cooney hadn't been in sight for the past two hours, which was one of the reasons Fred was maintaining informal guard duty until Wilma woke up. There'd been some trouble with Howard the evening before, and he suspected the tramp was still in a sulky mood, which wouldn't be improved any by the heat.

Twice, on its way to the house, the Cobrisol reached up languidly to snap a low-fluttering hoot out of the air; and each time, Fred winced. He'd convinced Wilma—and nearly convinced himself—that the olive-brown hoots and the pinkish, hopping robols were merely mobile vegetables; but he still didn't like the way they wriggled about hopefully inside the Cobrisol's elastic gullet, as if they were trying to poke their way out again.

"WILMA'S sleeping," he cautioned the creature, as it came sliding up to the foot of the stairs.

"Fine," said the Cobrisol in a low, pensive voice. "I don't

imagine you've made any progress in your plans to return to Earth?"

"Well, no.... Why?"

"It's unlikely that there *is* any way of doing it," the Cobrisol admitted. "Very unlikely. However, if you think of something, I'd appreciate it if you invited me to go along!"

Surprised, Fred said he'd be happy to do that. "I think you'd like it on a real farm," he added, a little doubtfully.

"Cobrisols are adaptable creatures," it assured him. "But there are limits!" It glanced indignantly up at their simmering source of heat and light overhead. "Do you realize, Fred, that there've been no Eyes around for nearly two full days? The One has simply gone away, leaving the temperature on high! It's inexcusable."

Fred hadn't considered the possibility that the heat-wave might be due to an oversight on the part of the supervisor. "In that case," he said hopefully, "he might be back any minute to turn it down, mightn't he?"

"He might," said the Cobrisol. "Even so, I feel wasted here! But one thing at a time. There's fresh trouble coming up, Fred!"

"If it's from the Icien," Fred remarked, a trifle complacently, "I wouldn't worry!" He held up one of his weapons. "There are Icien spears!"

The Cobrisol inspected the spears. "Very ingenious!" it acknowledged. "However, am I right in assuming, Fred, that the procreational problem involving the Cooney individual has come into the open?"

Fred reddened again and glanced at the hammock. "Howard did make a pass at Wilma after dinner last night," he said then, lowering his voice a trifle more. "I told him off!" He had, as a matter of fact, picked up one of the spears he was working on and threatened to run Howard out into the Icien-haunted night. Howard had gone white and backed down hurriedly.

"Ah?" said the Cobrisol. "A pass?"

Fred explained about passes.

"The Cooney is certainly easily frightened by the threat of physical destruction," the Cobrisol remarked. "But a frightened being is dangerously unpredictable!"

It paused, significantly.

"What are you driving at?" Fred inquired.

"An hour or so ago," said the Cobrisol, "I saw Cooney stealing into that section of the apple orchard that extends behind the house! I found him presently engaged in conversation with the Icien—"

"What?" Fred was stunned. "Why, Howard's scared to death of that thing!" he protested.

"I believe that fear of it was one of his motivations," the Cobrisol agreed. "His attitude was a propitiating one. Nevertheless, they have formed an alliance! The Cooney is to rule over all humans that are now in this Place or that may be transferred to it eventually, while he acknowledges the Icien as the supreme ruler of all beings here, and as his own superior.... It was decided that, as the first step in this program, Cooney is to devise a means whereby the Icien can come upon you unawares, Fred, and eat you!"

FRED DIDN'T tell Wilma of Howard's gruesome plotting with the Icien. She wouldn't be able to conceal her feelings well enough; and the conclusion he'd come to with the Cobrisol was that Howard must not suspect that they knew what he had done. Now and then, looking at the man—who, since his meeting with the Icien, had assumed a conciliatory and even mildly jovial attitude with the Nieheims—he had to suppress twinges of a feeling akin to horror. It was like living under the same roof with a ghoul!

But one had to admit, he thought, that Howard Cooney was being consistent. He had figured out the system here, and he intended to make use of it, just as he had announced he would do. If it hadn't been for the Cobrisol's alertness, he probably would have gotten away with it! In spite of the heat, Fred shivered.

After another two days, the meadow and orchard looked as if they had passed through an extreme summer's drought on Earth. It didn't get *much* hotter; it simply wouldn't cool down again at all, and the Little Place seemed to have forgotten how to produce rain. In the middle of the third night, Fred was lying awake when the Cobrisol slid its rubbery snout up on the pillow, next to his ear, and murmured, "Awake, Fred?"

"Yes," he whispered. It

must have come sliding in by the window, though he hadn't heard a sound.

"The kitchen," it muttered. Then it was gone again. Moving cautiously, Fred managed to get out of the bedroom without rousing either Wilma or Ruby and locked the door quietly behind him. He stood a moment in the almost pitch-black little hallway, grasping the larger of the two Icien spears. In the living room, Howard snored loudly and normally, as if he hadn't a thing on his conscience.

The Cobrisol was waiting beside the door that opened from the kitchen into the garden. That was the weak spot in the house. The windows were all too high and narrow for a creature of the Icien's build to enter by; the front door was bolted and locked, and at night Fred kept the key under his pillow. But the back door was secured only by a bolt which Howard, if he wanted to, could simply slide back to let the monster come inside....

"The Icien left its pool in the stream a short while ago," the Cobrisol whispered. "It's prowling about the house now. Do you hear it?"

Fred did. There wasn't a breath of breeze in the hot, black night outside; and no matter how carefully the Icien might be placing its great, awkward feet, the back garden was full of rustlings and creakings as it tramped about slowly in the drying vegetation. Presently, it came up to one of the kitchen windows and remained still for a while, apparently trying to peer inside. Fred couldn't even make out its silhouette against the darkness; but after a few seconds, an oily, alien smell reached his nostrils, and his hair went stiff at the roots....

Then it moved off slowly along the side of the house.

"GOING to wake up Cooney now!" The Cobrisol's voice was hardly more than a breath of sound in the dark.

This was how they had expected it would happen; but now that the moment was here, Fred couldn't believe that Howard was going to go through with the plan. Aside from everything else, it would be as stupid as forming a partnership with a man-eating tiger!

There came two faint thumps —presumably the Icien's flip-

per slapping cautiously against the frame of the living room window. Howard's snoring was cut off by a startled exclamation. Then there was dead silence. After what seemed a long time, Fred heard the Icien return along the outside of the house. It stopped in front of the back door and stayed there.

It wasn't until then that he realized Howard already had entered the kitchen. There was a sound of shallow, rapid breathing hardly six feet away from him.

For a time, the tramp simply seemed to stand there, as motionless as the Icien outside the door. Finally, he took a deep, sighing breath, and moved forward again. As Cooney's hand touched the door, groping for the bolt, Fred dropped his spear and flung both arms around him, pinning his arms to his sides and dragging him backwards.

Howard gasped and went heavily to the floor. Fred guessed that the Cobrisol had tripped him up and flung itself across his legs. He wasn't trying to struggle.

"Be quiet or we'll kill you!" he breathed hastily. Then they waited. Howard kept quiet.

What the Icien made of the brief commotion inside the kitchen and the following silence was anybody's guess. It remained where it was for perhaps another ten seconds. Then they heard it move unhurriedly off through the garden and back to the orchard again.

In the bedroom, Ruby started clucking concernedly....

"NOW THAT his criminal purpose has been amply demonstrated," the Cobrisol argued, "the neat and reasonable solution would be for me to swallow Cooney." It eyed Howard appraisingly. "I'm quite distensible enough for the purpose, I think! If we stun him first, the whole affair will be over in less than ten minutes—"

Howard, lying on the floor, tied hand and foot, burst into horrified sobs.

"We're not going to hurt you!" Fred assured him quickly. He wasn't feeling too sorry for Howard at the moment, but Wilma's face had gone white at the Cobrisol's unpleasant suggestion. "But we're not giving you a chance to try any more tricks on us either. You're really in stir now, Howard!"

He explained to Wilma that

they were going to use the bedroom as a temporary jail for Howard, since it was the only room in the house with a separate key.

"I know you were only joking," she told the Cobrisol. "But I wish you wouldn't talk about swallowing anybody again!"

"The jest was in bad taste!" the Cobrisol admitted penitently. It winked a green, unrepentant eye at Fred. "Almost a pun, eh, Fred?"

In the end, they tied Howard up a little more comfortably and took turns watching him till morning. Then Fred cleared out the bedroom, nailed heavy boards across the window, leaving slits for air and light, and locked the prisoner inside.

He'd just finished with that when the Cobrisol called him into the back garden.

"The other half of our criminal population is behaving in an odd fashion," the creature announced. "I wish you'd come along and help me decide why it's digging holes in the streambed...."

"Digging holes?" Fred hesitated. "It doesn't sound dangerous," he pointed out.

"Anything you don't understand can be dangerous!" the Cobrisol remarked sententiously. "Better come along, Fred."

Fred sighed and told Wilma to call him back if Howard showed any inclination to try to break out of the bedroom. From the edge of the orchard, they heard the Icien splashing around vigorously in one of the pools of the shrunken stream; and presently they were lying on top of the bank, peering cautiously down at it. Using its feet and flipper-tips, it was making clumsy but persistent efforts to scoop out a deep hole in the submerged mud.

"Iciens," whispered the Cobrisol, "are so rarely brought into contact with more civilized species that not much is known of their habits. Can you suggest a purpose for this activity, Fred?"

"Think it could be trying to dig its way out of the Little Place?" Fred whispered back.

"No. It's not that stupid!"

"Well," Fred whispered, "I read about fish once, or it could have been frogs—those are Earth animals—that dig themselves into the mud of a creek that's drying out, and sleep there until it fills up with water again."

The Cobrisol agreed that it was a possibility. "Though it's already dug a number of holes and covered them again...."

"Might still be looking for a soft spot," Fred suggested.

At that moment, they heard Wilma call Fred's name once, in a high, frightened voice.

HOWARD COONEY was waiting for them outside the kitchen door. Wilma stood in front of him, one arm twisted up behind her back, while Howard held the point of a small steak knife against the side of her neck. The two Icien spears leaned against the wall beside him.

"Slow to a walk!" he shouted in a hoarse, ragged voice, as they came in sight.

They slowed. The Cobrisol gliding beside him, Fred walked stiffly as far as the center of the garden, where Howard ordered him to stop again. Wilma's chin was trembling.

"I'm sorry, Fred!" she gasped suddenly. "I let him trick me!"

Howard jerked at her wrist. "Keep your mouth shut!" His eyes looked hot and crazy, and the side of his face kept twitching as he grinned at Fred.

"I'm in charge now, Buster!" he announced. "See how you like it!"

"What do you want me to do?" Fred kept his voice carefully even and didn't look at Wilma.

"The snake," said Howard, "doesn't come any closer, or this knife goes right in! Understand?"

"Certainly, I understand," said the Cobrisol. It began to curl up slowly into its usual resting position. "And, of course, I shall come no closer, Cooney! As you say, you're in charge now...."

Howard ignored it. He jerked his head at the door. "You, Buster—you go right through the kitchen and into the bedroom! Go to the other side of the bedroom and look at the wall. We'll come along behind you, and I'll lock you in. Get it?"

Crazy or not, he had it figured out. Walking slowly toward the door, Fred couldn't think of a thing he could do fast enough to keep that knife from going through Wilma's throat. And once he was locked in—

Wilma's eyes shifted suddenly past him. *"Ruby!"* she screamed. *"Sic him!"*

Fred was almost as shocked as Howard, as the pheasant, her feathers on end, came half-running, half-flying past him, went up like a rocket and whirred straight at Howard's face.

Howard screeched like a woman, dodged and slashed wildly and futilely at Ruby. Wilma twisted free of his grasp and threw herself to the ground as Fred flung himself forwards.

He went headlong over the Cobrisol, which was darting in from the side with the same purpose in mind, and rolled almost to Howard's feet. For a moment, the tramp's white, unshaven face seemed to hang in the air directly above him, glaring down at him; and light flashed from the edge of the knife. It was another wild swipe, and it missed Fred by inches. Then Howard had jumped back into the kitchen and slammed the door behind him.

BY THE time they got around to the front of the house, Cooney was racing down the meadow like a rabbit, heading for the orchard. He dodged in among the trees and turned toward the trout stream.

Fred stopped. "We're not going to follow him there just now!" he panted. He glanced down at the spear he'd grabbed up before charging off in pursuit, and wondered briefly what he would have done with it if they'd caught up with Howard! The Little Place seemed to bring out the more violent side in everybody's nature.

"Come on!" he said, a little shaken by the thought. "Let's get back to Wilma—"

"A moment, Fred!" The Cobrisol had lifted its head off the ground, peering after Howard. "Ah!"

A harsh, furious roar reached them suddenly from the orchard, mingled with a human yell of fright and dismay. Howard Cooney came scampering out into the meadow again, glancing back over his shoulder. Close behind him lumbered the black, clumsy form of the Icien, its flipper-arms outstretched....

"The confederates," murmured the Cobrisol, "are no longer in complete accord. As I suspected! Come on, Fred!"

It darted down into the meadow in its swift, weaving snake-gait. Fred ran after it, a little surprised by its sudden solicitude for Howard.

Everything happened very quickly then.

The Icien, to Fred's relief, stopped near the edge of the orchard when it saw them coming. The Cobrisol, well ahead of Fred, called suddenly, "Cooney! Wait!"

Howard looked round and saw two other deadly enemies hurrying toward him, apparently cutting off his escape from the Icien. He gave a scream of wild terror, turned and plunged toward the mirror-barrier.

A warning yell was gathering in Fred's throat, but he didn't have time to utter it. Howard reached the barrier and simply went on into it. Except that there wasn't the slightest ripple, he might have vanished in the same way beneath the surface of a quietly gleaming lake of quicksilver.

The Cobrisol turned and came gliding back to Fred.

"The barrier is still soft!" it remarked. "Well, that's the end of Cooney!"

Fred stared down at it, a little dazed. He was almost certain now that it had deliberately chased Howard into the barrier! "Is there anything we can do?"

The Cobrisol curled up comfortably in the rustling dead grass. The green eyes stared blandly up at him for a moment.

"No," it said. "There is nothing we can do. But in a while there may be something to see, and I think you should see it, Fred! Why don't you go back to Wilma? I'll call you when it happens."

Fred glanced at the tall, shining thing that had silently swallowed up a man. It was a very hot morning, but for a moment he felt chilled.

He turned round and went back to Wilma.

WHAT HAD occurred, according to Wilma, was that, shortly after Fred left the house, Howard Cooney began to groan loudly behind the bedroom door. When Wilma asked him what was wrong, he gasped something about his heart and groaned some more. Then there was a heavy thump inside the room, as if he'd fallen down; and, after that, silence.

Remembering he'd said he had a bad heart, Wilma hurriedly unlocked the door, without stopping to think. And Howard, of course, was waiting behind the door and simply grabbed her.

Wilma looked too remorseful for Fred to make any obvious comments. After all, he thought, he hadn't married her because of anything very remarkable about her brains, and Howard was—or had been—a pretty good actor! He decided not to tell her just yet what had happened to Howard; and when he heard the Cobrisol call him, he went out alone.

"He's trying to get out now," the Cobrisol told him. "Take a good look, Fred! If you ever go Outside, you'll know why you don't want to get lost there, like he did!"

FRED STARED apprehensively at the barrier which was changing as he looked at it. Now it no longer reflected the meadow and the house; its strange surface had become like a sheet of milky glass, stretching up into the artificial sky, and glowing as if from a pale light behind it. There was also a pattern of shifting and sliding colors inside it, which now coalesced suddenly into the vague outlines of Howard Cooney's shape. Only the shape looked about forty feet tall! It stood half turned away from them, in an attitude as if Howard were l i s t e n i n g or watching.

"He's got everything aroused out there," said the Cobrisol, "and he's begun to realize it. . . ."

Fred's mouth felt suddenly dry. "Listen," he b e g a n, "couldn't we—that is, couldn't I—"

"No," said the Cobrisol. "You couldn't! If you went Outside, you still couldn't find Cooney. And," it added cryptically, "even if I told you how to get back, they're alert now and they'd get you before you could escape—"

Fred swallowed. "Who are *they?*"

"Nobody knows," said the Cobrisol. "There are a number of theories—rank superstition, for the most part— Watch it, Fred! I think they've found him. . . ."

The shape inside the barrier had begun to move jerkily as if it were running in short sprints, first in one direction, then in another. Its size and proportions also changed constantly, and for a few seconds Howard Cooney's fear-crazed face filled the whole barrier, his eyes staring out into the Little Place.

Then the face vanished, and

there were many tiny figures of Cooney scampering about in the barrier.

Then he was no longer scampering, but crawling on hands and knees.

"They have him now!" the Cobrisol whispered.

There was only a single large figure left, lying face down inside the barrier, and to Fred it seemed to be slowing melting away. As it dwindled, the odd inner light of the barrier also dimmed, until it suddenly went out. A few seconds later, the milkiness vanished from it, and it had become a mirror-barrier again.

That appeared to be the end of it.

What actually had happened to Howard Cooney was something the Cobrisol was either unwilling or unable to explain to Fred. He didn't question it too persistently. He had an uneasy feeling that he wouldn't really like to know....

THE MORNING the kitchen faucets stopped delivering water from their unknown source of supply wasn't noticeably hotter than the preceding few mornings had been. But when Wilma called from the kitchen to complain of the trouble, Fred was appalled. He didn't dare finish the thought that leaped into his mind; he shut it away, and went hurriedly into the bathroom without replying to Wilma.

A thin, warm trickle ran from the tub faucet there, and that was all.

He shut it off at once, afraid of wasting a single drop, and started for the kitchen. Wilma met him in the hall.

"Fred," she repeated, "the water—"

"I know," he said briskly. "We'll take all the pots and pans we have and fill them with water from the bathtub. It's still running there, but not very strong. They might turn it on again any moment, of course, but we want to be sure...."

He'd felt he was being quite casual about it, but as he stopped t a l k i n g, something flickered in Wilma's eyes; and he knew they were both thinking the same thought.

She reached out suddenly and squeezed his hand. "It's too hot to kiss you, but I love you, Freddy! Yes, let's fill the pots and pans—"

"Or you do that, while I go talk to the Cobrisol," Fred said. He added reassuringly,

"The Cobrisol's had a lot of experience with these Places, you know! It'll know just what to do."

What he had in mind, however, when he left Wilma in charge of the pots and pans in the bathroom, picked up a spear and went quietly outdoors, wasn't conversation with the Cobrisol. There had been no reason to dispute the Icien's appropriation of the entire trout stream; but now a more equitable distribution of the water rights in the Little Place seemed to be in order.

IF IT hadn't been so breathlessly still, the scene around the house might have been an artistic reproduction of the worst section of the Dust Bowl —or it could have been one of the upper and milder levels of hell, Fred thought. He looked around automatically to see if the Eyes had returned—they hadn't—and instead caught sight of the Cobrisol and the Icien down near the mirror-barrier, at the orchard's edge.

He stopped short in surprise. So far as he could see at that distance, the two creatures were engaged in a serious but not unfriendly discussion. There was about twenty-five feet of space between them, which was probably as close as the Cobrisol, fast as it was, cared to get to the Icien. But it was coiled up in apparent unconcern.

He walked slowly down the dried-out meadow toward them. As he approached, both turned to look at him.

"Fred," said the Cobrisol, "the Icien reports there isn't even a drop of moist mud left in the trout stream this morning!"

The Icien stared balefully at Fred and said nothing; but he realized a truce had been declared to cope with the emergency. Somewhat self-consciously, he grounded the spear —it was useless now—and told them about the kitchen faucets. "What can we do about it? In this heat—"

"In this heat, and without water," the Cobrisol agreed soberly, "none of us will be alive very many hours from now! Unless—"

"Fred!" Wilma's call reached them faintly from the porch.

He turned, with a sinking feeling in his chest. "Yes?"

"The — bathtub — just — quit!" Her distant, small face looked white and strained.

Suddenly, Fred was extraordinarily thirsty. "It's all right, honey!" he shouted back. "We're going to fix it!" She hesitated a moment, and then went back into the house. He turned to the other two. "We *can* fix it, can't we?" he pleaded.

"There is a way, of course," the Icien rumbled. "But—" It shrugged its black leather shoulders discouragedly.

"We've been discussing it," said the Cobrisol. "The fact is, Fred, that the only one who can remedy this situation is yourself! And, undoubtedly, the attempt would involve extreme risk for you personally...."

Fred guessed it then. "One of us has to go Outside to fix it; and neither of you can do it. Is that it?"

The two creatures stared at him.

"That's it!" the Cobisol agreed reluctantly. "I can't explain, just now, why it would be impossible for either of us to go Outside—but between us we can tell you exactly what to do there! The risk, of course, is that what happened to Cooney will also happen to you. But if you make no mistakes—"

"He'll panic!" the Icien growled darkly. "They all do!"

"No," said the Cobrisol. "It's been done before, Fred. But not very often."

Fred sighed and wiped a film of dirty sweat off his forehead with a hand that shook a little, but not too much. It seemed to him they were making a great deal of conversation about something that couldn't be helped!

"Dying of thirst," he pointed out reasonably, "gets to be pretty dangerous, too! What am I supposed to do?"

AS SOON as he'd stepped Outside, he realized that, though the Cobrisol and the Icien had warned him of this particular problem, his real difficulty would be to remember exactly what he was supposed to do.

Basically, it was very simple—but he didn't want to do it!

Irrelevant thought-pictures were streaming through his mind. Wilma's white, tear-stained face as he'd seen it last, just a moment ago—but that moment was darting off into the past behind him as if a week passed with every heartbeat here! Clusters of bright, flickering memory-scenes of their farm; back home on

Earth, swirled next through his head.... The reason for this kind of disturbance, the two creatures had told him, was that he didn't want to know what was going on Outside!

It was too different. Different enough, if he hadn't been warned, to hold him here shocked and stunned, trying to blind himself mentally to the strangeness around him, until it was too late—

That thought frightened Fred enough to drive the little escape-pictures out of his head as if a sudden gust of wind had swept them up and away together. He'd just recalled that he had very little time here!

He looked around.

It wasn't, he thought, really as bad as he'd expected! He got the instant impression—partly, at least, because of what he'd been told—that he was standing in the middle of the audible thought-currents of a huge mechanical mind. Not audible, exactly; the currents seemed to be tugging at him or pulsing rhythmically through and about him, in all directions. Most of them, as the Cobrisol had explained, appeared to be connected in some way or another with the up-keep of the Little Place. But there were others, darkly drifting things or very deep sounds—it was hard to distinguish really just what they *were* most like—that were completely and terrifyingly incomprehensible to Fred....

Some of those were the dangerous ones! He wasn't to give them any attention. He waited.

THE MOMENT none of those dark, monstrous waves seemed to be passing anywhere near him, he quickly verbalized the first of the three things they had told him to think here:

"The Little Place has become too dry for the life-forms in it! There should be water and rain again in the Little Place!"

He held the thought, picturing rain coming down in sheets all over the Little Place, the trout stream running full again, and water pouring freely from all the faucets in the house. Then he let the pictures and the thoughts go away from him. For an instant, there seemed to be a tiny shifting, a brief eddy of disturbance passing through all the mental flows about him.

Hurriedly, he formed the second thought:

"The temperature has become too high for the life-forms in the Little Place! The temperature must be adjusted to their normal living requirements!"

This time, he'd barely finished the thought before it seemed to be plucked out of his mind by a sudden agitated swirling in the living currents about him. Then he had a sense of darkening, and something huge and deadly and invisible went flowing closely past, trailing behind it a fluttering apparition that brought a soundless scream of terror into Fred's throat. It was a shape that looked exactly as Howard Cooney had looked in life, except that it was no thicker than a sheet of paper! For an instant, as Howard's eyes glared sightlessly in his direction, he had the impression that somewhere far overhead Howard had called his name. Then the thing that brought darkness with it and the fluttering shape were gone.

The other disturbances continued. In some way, the Outside was growing aware of his presence and beginning to look for him!

The next order he hadn't discussed with the others, since he was certain they would have tried to talk him out of giving it.

"The life-forms in the Little Place that were taken away from Earth must be returned unharmed to Earth!"

Hastily, thinking of the Cobrisol, he added:

"Including any other life-forms that would like to come along—except Iciens!"

Something like a long crash of thunder went shaking all through him—apparently, that last set of instructions had upset the entire Outside!

Fred didn't bother to think out the final thought. He shouted with all his strength: "And I should *now* be standing on the other side of the mirror-barrier inside the Little Place!"

Instantly, he was there. Rain was slamming down in sheets all about him, like an Earthly cloud-burst, as Wilma, laughing and crying, grabbed him by an arm. Hand in hand, they ran through the soaking meadow toward the house, the Cobrisol streaking ahead of them. The Icien was nowhere in sight.

"I DIDN'T say exactly how *much* rain and water!" Fred admitted. They had discovered they couldn't turn the

faucets off now! It didn't matter much, since the surplus water vanished down through the drains as usual. But, two hours after Fred's return to the Little Place, the cloud-burst outdoors was continuing in full strength.

The Cobrisol lay in a corner of the kitchen, its teeth chattering, as if it were chilled. Wilma had shoved blankets under it and piled more blankets on top, and they had lit the stove. Actually the temperature had dropped only to the equivalent of a rather warm, rainy spring day on Earth.

"I should have cautioned you," the creature remarked, between fits of chattering, "to limit your order for water! You had no way of knowing that Cobrisols react unfavorably to excessive atmospheric moisture. . . ."

"This capsulating you mentioned," Wilma inquired concernedly, "does it hurt?"

"Not at all, Wilma!" the Cobrisol assured her. "I shall simply shrivel up rather suddenly—it's a completely automatic process, you see, and not under my control—and form a hard shell around myself. As soon as things dry out sufficiently, the shell splits, and there I am again!"

Fred had offered to go back Outside and rephrase the order concerning the water, but he was rather relieved when everyone told him not to be foolish. At worst, the Cobrisol would simply go dormant for a while, and the disturbance caused by his visit obviously hadn't settled out yet.

From time to time, strange lights went gliding about erratically inside the mirror-barrier, as if the Little Place's mechanical wardens were persisting in their search for the intruder. Occasional faint tremors passed through the foundations of the house, and there were intermittent rumblings in the air, which might have been simulated Earth-thunder, to accompany the rain.

"There's a good chance," the Cobrisol explained, "that all this commotion may return the One's attention to the Little Place, in which case we can expect normal weather conditions to be re-established promptly. Otherwise—well, I'm sure you agree with me now, Fred, that only an absolute emergency would justify going Outside again!"

And, of course, Fred did

agree. He hadn't gone into specific details concerning his experience there, since he knew it would be disturbing to Wilma. And neither had he mentioned his order to get them transferred back to Earth—almost anything seemed justified to get away from a place where your future depended entirely on somebody else's whims—but he was guiltily certain that that was the cause of most of the uproar!

Now and then they looked out from a window to see if the Eyes had reappeared; but none had. Towards evening, Fred observed the Icien wandering about the lower end of the meadow, trailing its flipper-arms through rivulets of water and stopping now and then to stare up into the streaming sky, as if it enjoyed getting thoroughly soaked. Unlike the Cobrisol, it was, of course, an aquatic sort of creature to begin with.

Just as he went to sleep that night, Fred almost managed to convince himself that when he next woke up, he would discover they were all safely back on Earth. However, when he did awaken, he knew instantly the Outside hadn't acted upon that order. They were still in the Little Place—and it was raining harder than ever!

THE COBRISOL had elected to sleep in the kitchen, but it wasn't lying on the chair before the stove where they had left it. Fred was wondering where it had crawled to, when another thought struck him. Expectantly, he separated the blankets on the chair.

The shell was lying there, a brown, s m o o t h, egg-shaped shell—but hardly bigger than a healthy goose-egg! It was difficult to imagine the Cobrisol shrinking itself down to that size; but it couldn't be anything else. Feeling as if he were handling an urn containing the remains of a friend, Fred carried the shell carefully into the bedroom and laid it down on the bed.

"He said it was practically impossible to damage these shells," he reminded Wilma. "But it might be better not to let Ruby peck at it."

"I'll watch her," Wilma promised, big-eyed. From the way she kept staring at the shell, Fred gathered that Wilma, too, felt as if the Cobrisol somehow had passed away, even if it was only a temporary arrangement.

"He'll probably be hatching again pretty soon," he said briskly. "I'll go check on the weather now...."

He opened the front porch door and stopped there, appalled. A sheet of water covered the entire meadow and lapped up to within forty feet of the house! In the orchard, half the trees were submerged. Considering the slope of the ground, the water would be at least ten yards deep where it stood against the mirror-barrier. And the rain still drummed down furiously upon it!

He checked his first impulse to call Wilma. News as bad as that could wait a little! The barrier stood there, placidly mirroring the scene of the flood. Except for eerie rumbling sounds that still echoed in the upper air, the Outside seemed to be back to normal.

So, if he swam across now, Fred thought, before it rose any higher—

The order would be a quite simple one: "Reduce rainfall and water-level to meet the normal requirements of the life-forms within the Little Place."

And if he did it immediately, Wilma wouldn't have a chance to get all upset about it.

Of course, if he got caught Outside this time—

She and Ruby would be just as badly off one way as the other, he decided. He wasn't going to get caught! It would only take him a few minutes....

HE CLOSED the porch door quietly behind him, stripped hurriedly to his shorts and started down towards the water, mentally rehearsing the order he would give, to fix it firmly in his mind. Intent on that, he almost overlooked the slow, heavy swirling of the water-surface to his left as he began to wade out. A big fish, a section of his mind reported absently, had come up out of deep water into the shallows, turned sharply and gone out again—

He stopped short, feeling a sudden burst of icy pricklings all over him. A fish? There weren't any fish here!

He turned, slipping and almost stumbling on the submerged grass, and plunged back toward the higher ground. There was a sudden tremendous splash just behind him and a surge of water round his knees. Then he was on solid ground; he ran on a few yards

and slowed, looking back.

The Icien hadn't tried to follow him out of the water. It stood upright, black and dripping, in the rain-whipped shallows, probably furious at having missed its chance at him.

They stared silently at each other. He might have guessed it, Fred thought, looking at the great flat flipper-arms. The first time he'd seen it, it had reminded him of a huge sting-ray. It was an aquatic creature by choice, and this flood suited it perfectly!

And it was intelligent enough to know why he would want to swim back to the mirror-barrier!

He thought of the speed with which it had come driving after him, and knew that even with his spears he didn't have a chance against that kind of creature in deep water.

The Icien knew it, too! But it might expect him to make a final desperate attempt before the water came lapping into the house....

Fred walked back to the porch and pulled his clothes on again. When he looked round before going inside, the Icien had vanished.

LESS THAN three minutes later, Fred stepped quietly out the back door, carrying his spear. He heard Wilma lock and bolt the door behind him as he splashed carefully through the big puddles in the garden. Then he was trotting up the rain-drenched rising ground behind the house towards a wall of misty nothingness a few hundred yards away.

He wished the Cobrisol hadn't been obliged to capsulate itself so quickly; he could have used that knowledgeable creature's advice just now! But it had mentioned that there were a number of soft spots in the barriers around the Little Place. All he had to do was to find one that the rising flood hadn't made inaccessible, step through it, and give one quick order to the huge mechanical mind that was the Outside.

That was the way he had explained it to Wilma. He had a notion the Icien wouldn't attempt to stop him outside the water, even if it knew what he was up to. Spear in hand and in his own element, he didn't intend to be stopped by it, anyway!

He had covered half the distance between the house and

the nearest barrier when a new inhabitant of the Little Place stood up unhurriedly behind a rock twenty yards ahead of him, blocking his advance.

Fred stopped, startled. For a moment, he had thought it was the Icien. But then he saw it was much closer than he had thought and quite small, hardly four feet high; though in every other respect it was very similar to the black monster. It spread its flipper-arms wide, opened a black gash of a mouth and snarled at him, fearless and threatening.

He thought: *It's a young one!*

The Icien had started to breed....

Holding the spear in both hands, Fred walked rapidly towards it. Iciens at any age appeared to be irreconcilably hostile, and he didn't care to wait until the big one came along to join the dispute! If it didn't get out of his way—

At the last moment, with a hiss of fury, the Icien cub waddled aside. Fred stepped cautiously past it—and stopped again.

AN ARMY of the little horrors seemed to be rising up in front of him! They sprouted into view behind boulders and bushes, and came hurrying in from right and left. There was a burst of ugly, hoarse Icien voices, which sounded very much like a summons to their awesome parent.

For a second or two, Fred was chiefly bewildered. Where had that horde arrived from so suddenly? Then a memory of the big Icien, scooping out holes in the mud of the half-dried trout stream, flashed up; it must have been sowing its brood then, in some strange, unearthly fashion. Obviously their growth rate simply wasn't that of Earth creatures.

He half turned and speared the first one as its flipper-tip gripped his leg. The blade sank into its body, and it snarled hideously, striking at him while it died. He pulled out the spear and slashed at another which had rushed in but stopped now, just out of reach.

Three had moved in behind him, apparently with the intention of cutting off his retreat to the house. But he was still headed for the barrier. He dodged to the left and turned uphill again; another line of them confronted him there!

As Fred hesitated, he heard Wilma cry out to him. He

glanced back and saw she had come out of the kitchen, carrying the other spear—and that the big Icien was striding ponderously along the side of the house, on its way up from the flooded meadow. . . .

He turned back.

He had to spear two more of the ugly young before he got down to the garden; and the second of the two clung howling and dying to the spear-shaft. He dropped the spear, bundled Wilma into the kitchen and slammed and bolted the door almost in the big Icien's face. Seconds later, the black pack was roaring and banging against the outside wall. A flipper slapped and tore at the window-screen, and he jabbed at it with the tip of Wilma's spear until it vanished.

WILMA WAS shouting in his ear. "What?" he yelled dazedly.

"The Eyes!" she shouted. "They're back!"

"The Eyes?" Then he saw she was pointing up out the window into the rain.

More than a dozen of the odd shiny gadgets drifted there in the air. As Fred stared, a huge one—almost ten feet across—sailed slowly and majestically past the window. The roaring outside the house stopped suddenly, and there were splashing sounds everywhere from the garden, as if the Icien and its brood were departing in great haste.

But the thundering racket in the upper air was growing louder by the second—and changing now in a manner Fred couldn't immediately define. He stood listening, and suddenly a wild notion came to him. He turned to Wilma.

"Quick! Get into the bedroom!"

"The bedroom?" She looked startled. "Why?"

"Don't ask!" He hustled her down the hall ahead of him. Ruby was screeching her head off behind the closed door. "Grab Ruby—make her shut up! I'll be right back."

Recklessly, he tore open the front door and looked out. Young Iciens were still streaming past on either side of the house, hurrying awkwardly to the water's edge and plunging in. The big Eye—or another one like it—was stationed in front of the porch now, turning slowly as if anxious to take in everything. For a moment, it seemed to Fred that it was fo-

cusing itself d i r e c t l y on him....

He closed the door and hurried back into the bedroom. Wilma was sitting on the bed with Ruby in her lap and the shell of the Cobrisol under one hand. He sat down beside her.

"What do we do now, Fred?"

"We just wait!" He was trembling with exhaustion and excitement.

"Those noises—" she said.

"Yes?"

"It sounds to me," Wilma told him wonderingly, "exactly like two people were having themselves a big fight next door!"

"Or up in the attic," Fred nodded. "And it sounds even more like one person is being told off good by another one, doesn't it?"

"By a much bigger one!" Wilma agreed. She was watching him shrewdly. "You know something you haven't told me yet! What's going to happen?"

"I'm not sure," Fred admitted. "But I think in a minute or two—"

The world suddenly went black.

IT WAS still black when Fred found he w a s thinking again. He decided he must have been unconscious for some while, because he felt stiff all over. Now he was lying on his back on something hard and lumpy and warm. Wilma's head, he discovered next, was pillowed on his arm, and she was breathing normally. Somewhere near the top of his head, Ruby clucked away irritably as she tended to do when she was half awake.

"Wilma?" he whispered.

"Yes, Fred?" she said sleepily. And then, "Where are we? It's awfully dark here!"

He was wondering himself. "It'll probably get light soon," he said soothingly. Wilma was sitting up, and now she gave an exclamation of surprise.

"We're outdoors somewhere, Fred! This is grass we're lying on—"

"It was m a g n i f i c e n t l y done!" another voice remarked, startlingly close to Fred's ear. It was a small, rather squeaky voice, but it seemed familiar.

"Who was that?" Wilma inquired nervously.

"I think," said Fred, "it's the Cobrisol!" He groped about cautiously and found the shell lying next to his head. It appeared to be cracked down the long side, and something

was stirring inside it. "Are you uncapsulating again?" he inquired.

"Correct!" said the Cobrisol. "But allow me to continue my congratulations, Fred. You appear to have resolved successfully a situation that had baffled even a Cobrisol! Need I say more?"

"I guess not," said Fred. "Thanks—"

"Wilma," the Cobrisol resumed, "you seem concerned about this darkness—"

"I'm glad you're back, Cobrisol!" she told it.

"Thank you," said the creature. "As I was about to explain, the appearance of darkness about us is a common phenomenon of transfer. Nothing to worry about! And—ah!"

They all cried out together, a chorus of startled and expectant voices. Around them, like black curtains whisking aside, like black smoke dispelled by a blower, the darkness shifted and vanished. Yellow sunlight blazed down on them, and the two humans threw up their hands to shield their eyes.

Then they lowered them again. It was, after all, no brighter than was normal for a clear summer day! They were sitting at the top of a sloping green meadow. They looked out over it, blinking....

"Why!" Wilma said, in a small, awed voice. "Why, Fred! We're home!"

Then she burst into tears.

SOME HOURS later, sitting on the front porch of the farm house—the *real* front porch of the *real* farm house—Fred remarked, "There's one thing I just don't get!"

"What's that, Fred?" The Cobrisol lifted its head inquiringly out of the hammock. It was about the size of a healthy rattlesnake by now and accepting a sandwich or two from Wilma every half hour.

Fred hesitated and then told the Cobrisol quietly about the gruesome, fluttering thing he'd seen Outside that looked like Cooney.

"There are various theories about what happens to those who get lost Outside," the Cobrisol said thoughtfully. "There is no reason to provide you with additional material for nightmares, so I won't tell you what I think you saw. But it was the fact that the Icien and I were acquainted with some of those theories that made it quite impossible for

either of us to do what you did!"

It paused. "Otherwise, everything seems clear enough now. The One who collected you and Wilma and Ruby and the Cooney was obviously as immature as I suspected. He had no right to do it. Your interference with the mechanisms of the Outside created enough disturbance to attract the attention of a mature One, who then chastised the offender and returned you to Earth where you belonged—"

THE COBRISOL sniffed the air greedily. "That's another bacon-and-egg sandwich Wilma is fixing!" it remarked with appreciation. "Yes, I'm sure I'll like it on Earth, Fred. But your hypothesis that my shell came along by accident is highly debatable. For one thing, you've n o t i c e d, of course, that we have retained the ability to understand each other's speech-forms—which, I gather, is not the rule among different species on Earth!"

"Well—" The fact had escaped Fred's attention till now. "That could be an accident," he pointed out. "They just forgot to switch it off, or whatever they do."

"Possibly," the Cobrisol acknowledged. "I believe, however, that having become aware of our cooperative efforts in the Little Place, the mature One decided to utilize the special talents of a Cobrisol in whatever Project is being conducted on Earth. Had you thought of going into politics, Fred?"

Fred chuckled. "No! And I don't blame you for not being able to get rid of the feeling you're still in some Place or other. But this is Earth—and nobody else has any Projects here! You'll realize all that, by and by."

"No doubt," said the Cobrisol. "What's that passing way up high above the apple orchard, Fred?"

Fred looked, and leaped excitedly out of his chair. "Hey, Wilma! Come quick!" he shouted. "No—it's gone now! Boy, they *are* fast...."

Then his voice trailed off, and he felt his face go pale, as he turned to stare at the Cobrisol.

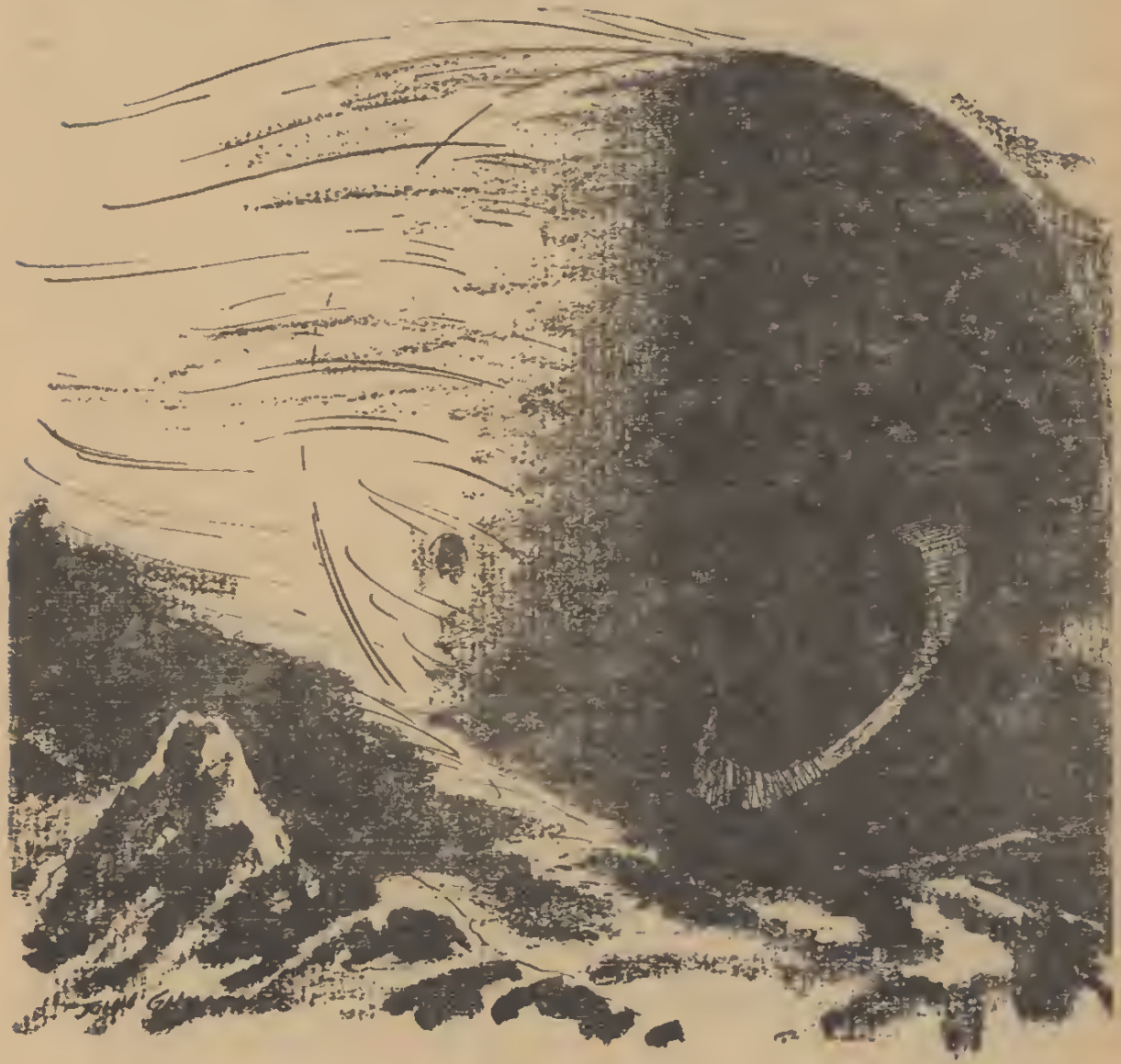
"A flying saucer!" he muttered.

"Oh?" said the Cobrisol. "Is that what they call the Eyes here, Fred?"

THE END

THE EARTHMAN

Nobody on Tolliver's Planet liked a freak!



by Milton Lesser

WHEN AUGIE HALLER trudged inside the ship from the south acres, he went straight to where his father was sitting in what, two generations before, had been the control cabin.

"Pop," he said, "I plan to walk over to Space City and get myself fashioned. I ain't fooling."

"You can't do that, Augie," Haller said, putting down the newspaper which came by pneumotube every second day from Space City. Haller was a big, lethargic, raw-boned man with a complete lack of nerv-

ous energy. He stood as if at parade rest with his hands behind his back, looking at his son. He could stand that way for hours without moving a muscle. Augie had seen him do it.

"Anyhow," Augie said stubbornly, "I aim to."

"Augie, listen to me. You're crew, not colonist."

"Pop, it's the way they look at me. The way I know they laugh behind my back. The girls over at Space City—they were looking and laughing like that all the time we went to Services at Space City last Sunday. I been thinking."

"Sure you're different," Haller said, still standing at parade rest. "It ain't like it will be permanent, though. We're crew. We're not staying on here at Tolliver's Planet."

But Augie shook his head. "That's just what grandpop used to say when I was little. Besides, almost all the crew people have gone and got themselves fashioned. And grandpop is dead now. He never got to leave Tolliver's Planet, did he?"

"Augie, I don't like you talking like that. He figured it was some kind of mistake, your grandpop. He always figured the ship from Earth would come soon and take us back. Mark me, Augie. They will. But even if they don't, no Haller is going to get himself fashioned."

"We Hallers got the poorest farmland in the region," Augie said, licking his dry lips and tasting the saltiness of caked sweat on his face.

"What has that got to do with it?" Haller asked. "This ain't farmland. It's spaceship landing land. It's where the first colonist ship to Tolliver's came down. It's where we stay until they come to take us back to Earth."

"Pop, they ain't never coming. I just know it."

"Don't talk like that, Augie."

"Don't people back on Earth get themselves fashioned, too?" Augie wanted to know.

" 'Course not. They got no reason to."

"Well, I have."

Without changing expression Haller said, "I'll take a strap to you if you carry on like that in front of your mom."

Augie could hear his mother bustling about in the galley half a hundred yards arear-ships. Even this had become a sore spot with him. Even be-

fore he was born, most of the families had gone and built themselves cabins and houses, but the Hallers still lived in the ruins of the first of the colonizing spaceships, which Grandpop Haller, now dead, had brought down on Tolliver's Planet himself. It was all temporary, Grandpop Haller had always said. Why build a cabin if it's only temporary? Augie was eighteen years old. It had been temporary going on into the third generation.

"No more crazy talk about getting fashioned," Haller said.

Augie nodded. "All right. I won't talk about it."

THAT NIGHT, Augie waited until his folks were asleep, then crammed a field pack full of salted pork so mean it tasted like dry, flakey brine. He filled three canteens with water, knowing that the brackish water found in the lowlands between the ship and Space City couldn't be trusted. He figured if he kept on walking all night, he could reach Space City, nearly thirty miles away, by sunrise. Twinrise, they called it on Tolliver's Planet, remembering that Earth had but one sun.

It was a hard, masculine country, the gnarled rock-heaped cliffs and buttresses falling off steep and sudden to the swampy lowlands. On the other side of Space City, the south side, was the good farmland, the rich black earth, the soft-curving, lushly green feminine hills. It was there that most of the fashioned people lived and worked. Though, come to think of it, Augie could recall only two other families here on the north side of the city who were still unfashioned. The Jacksons and the Muldoons, holders on Pape Svenson's farm. Unfashioned trash, like the Hallers.

By midnight, Augie reached the edge of the escarpment which looked, in daylight, as if it had been hacked away by a giant's knife, leaving a sheer drop of five hundred feet and more to the lowlands. Augie's feet trod surely upon the one safe ledge snaking its way down the escarpment. The fashioned mountain people never had this trouble, of course. They could negotiate the steepest upcountry passes like the families of goats which had been brought, fifty some years ago, from Earth.

The fashioned swamp people swam with natural flippers.

You never heard of a fashioned swamper drowning, but only last year one of the unfashioned Muldoons had been lost in the bitter waters of the swamps. It had been on the way back from Sunday Services, and the Muldoons had not gone since. *It's unfair,* Augie thought. *They don't ever bring the Services up here to the hill country. If we want anything, we unfashioneds have got to go down to Space City and claim it.*

Insects humming and droning about his head, Augie cut out across the sponge-soft swamp path. The insects were hissing, shrilling, biting, invisible devils. Naturally, the fashioned swampers secreted in their sweat a hormone which the insects found distasteful. Well, Augie wouldn't return to the ship without being fashioned.

AUGIE REMAINED in an alley between the Fashioning Center and a grain elevator until it was time for the Center to open. While he was free to walk the streets of Space City like any other citizen of Tolliver's Planet, Augie preferred to remain hidden. He loved the city. He wanted to see it. But he would strike someone down if the looks and secret little laughs followed him through the streets.

At last a bent old man, a fashioned city dweller with roller feet, came gliding down the street to the door of the Fashioning Center. Once this had been the very heart of Space City, Augie knew, but years ago the bulk of fashioning had been completed. Since a boy had to follow in his fashioned father's footsteps because somatoplasm and germplasm were fashioned in the same operation, the city had developed south away from the Fashioning Center, leaving it in a rundown area for upland grain storage.

Augie waited until the old man disappeared inside the building, then hurried out of the alley and walked up to the entrance. Two swampers came by, their flipper feet cased in metal walking boots. The younger one looked like he was going to make some snide remark about Augie, but just then a fashioned city dweller came rolling by swiftly. The swampers clomped awkwardly out of his way, cursing as he streaked by.

The older one said, "The

lousy roller would sink like a stone in the swamps."

"He ain't in the swamps, Pa."

Forgetting Augie, they walked down the street. Augie went swiftly to the entrance of the Fashioning Center. He was about to open the door when he saw the faded sign on the wooden planking.

STOP!
Are You Sure?
Fashioning is Permanent
Decide Upon Your Proper Orientation
Brochure on Request

Yes, Augie was sure. There would be hell to pay with pop, but Augie would have to drift away from the Haller family anyway. A fashioned city dweller didn't hobnob with the few remaining unfashioned people. And Augie would be that: a premature sense of pride in his new station had engulfed him unexpectedly as he saw the roller flash by, leaving the two awkward swampers in his wake. Augie would be a fashioned city dweller. He pushed the door in and sought out the bent old man.

THE SMALL man looked up from his desk in surprise as Augie approached him. "Well now," he said. "You're unfashioned, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then your name would be Jackson, Haller or Muldoon. Which is it, son?"

"It's Haller, sir," Augie said timidly.

"These days, I'm mostly a watchman. It's been better than three years—no, more like four years—since anyone wanted to get fashioned. Guess I still remember the routine, though. How old are you, son?"

"Eighteen," Augie said. The old man looked like he was in his sixties. He had probably been a boy somewhat younger than Augie on the spaceships.

"You've got parental consent in writing?"

"You mean from my father?"

"Yes. You'll need it, by law."

No one had told Augie about this. But then, most people were already fashioned and had been so from birth. They didn't mix socially with the few who weren't. "Please," Augie said desperately. "My father is Jake Haller. Maybe

you knew his father, Sam Haller, on the spaceships?"

"Captain Sam?" the old man's faded eyes gleamed momentarily. "You bet I knew him. Never met your father, though, young fellow. Captain Sam was a cantankerous guy, but what a sweet astrogator." The faded eyes grew misty as remembrance crowded the brain behind them.

Augie said, "My Pop is like that, too. Stubborn. He won't give permission, but I'm eighteen—"

"You've got to be twenty without parental consent. Why don't you run along home, son, and either get that permission in writing or wait two years. Maybe by then you'll change your mind, anyway."

"I can't go home," Augie said. "I don't want to go back there. I belong in the city. I want to be a roller like you."

"Roller, huh?"

"That's right."

"Son, I wish I could help you. But you know, sometimes an old roller like me gets to wish he had normal feet like normal people are supposed to have."

"You mean me? I'm normal? I'm a *freak*," Augie said hotly.

"Here on Tolliver's Planet, maybe. Not home on Earth."

"This is home, right here."

The old man smiled. "Well, don't mind the older generation, son. I guess you're right."

"At least show me what it's like," Augie said. His eyes were suddenly wet and hot. He had to see the fashioning machinery. Maybe then he could wait two years, but not otherwise. He needed something concrete he could look forward to.

"I don't see any harm in that," the old man said. "Come along with me."

Augie nodded eagerly, following the old man across the floor toward a doorway. On the doorsill, dust was piled thickly. Augie knew it was a long time since someone had walked this way. His heart pounding up in his throat, Augie watched the old man open the door.

Just then, there was the sound of a high, piercing whistle outside. The old man cocked an ear as if the sound were as strange and as rare as Augie's presence here at the Fashioning Center.

"Hey, now!" the old man called, rolling toward the front door. "That's the general alarm. Haven't heard that since three drunk swampers

shot up Space City one night four-five years ago!"

AUGIE FOLLOWED the old man out into the street. An electric truck which ran on an underground cable rolled by. A microphone blared:

"Attention! Attention! The Uplands Observatory sighted a spaceship coming in towards Tolliver's Planet." The voice, oddly metallic, became tremulous. "A ship from Earth will be landing here soon, folks. A ship with real honest to goodness Earth people on it."

Upland-swamper-roller enmity was forgotten in the excitement of the moment. Augie saw swampers clomp out of the way as rollers rushed by, the swampers not resentful, the rollers not haughty; uplanders on ungainly three-jointed stilt-like legs talked to swampers, to rollers.

"She's coming in over the city now!" the metallic voice cried.

A rushing sound could be heard, a far roaring of thunder. In the reddish sky, twenty degrees from where the small white sun of Tolliver's Planet followed the swollen red sun across the heavens, a black speck appeared. It circled and grew like a fly homing in on a vat of molasses.

"Someone better let them know they can't land in the swamps near the city," Augie told the old man. "Maybe it looks solid from up there."

"They know what they're doing," the old man said, his eyes misty again. "They're Earthmen."

But Augie went on: "The only place they can land safely is in the uplands where my folks and the Muldoons and the Jacksons live. Unless they want to land halfway around the planet somewhere."

"You'd say that," the old man said bitterly. "You're unfashioned. For you it doesn't matter where they land. You can go just anyplace. We rollers couldn't go off into the uplands if we wanted to. We couldn't cross the swamps, either. You think we don't want to see the people from Earth? We're human too, aren't we?"

The old man's outburst disturbed Augie strangely. It was totally unexpected. He always thought the rollers lorded it all over the swampers, uplanders and few remaining unfashioned people. He thought the uplanders and swampers, in their

turn, lorded it over the unfashioned. On the bottom of the social scale, the unfashioned could do nothing but sulk, like most of the Muldoons, or remain in stolid stoicism, like his father, Jake Haller, on the mean farms, or squat in dumb, animal-like stupor on their small holdings on the good Svenson land, like the Jacksons.

The roaring black dot overhead had now assumed spherical shape and was flecked with hints of brilliant silver. The sound it made increased in volume and rose in pitch until it threatened to burst Augie's eardrums. From the bottom of the silver-black sphere appeared a tentative jet of flame, licking out like a probing, questioning finger. Soon it became long and steady, like a great column of red-hot metal. Down its length, as if enveloping what it had spawned, came the spaceship.

"They're going to miss the city!" Augie cried.

"They couldn't land in the city," the old man told him.

"They're heading for the swamps. That spaceship will sink in the swamps."

"Just calm down, young fellow. You're not thinking straight because you wanted them to land in the uplands."

The spaceship, dropping slowly now, disappeared a mile or so beyond a row of grain elevators on the edge of the city. Seconds later, there was a great splashing sound, then complete silence.

The metallic voice said: "The spaceship has landed."

It was unnecessary. Rollers, uplanders and swampers were moving toward the edge of the city in a great surge of fashioned humanity. Augie forgot his feelings of inferiority and ran with them.

Five hundred yards in from the edge of the swamps, on a small island of solid earth, the spaceship was burning.

A WAILING arose from the ranks of fashioned people on the edge of the swamps. "Get the swampers in after them," someone shouted. "They're in trouble."

Tongues of bright red flame were licking up around the spherical spaceship. Several swampers began unfastening their cumbersome metal boots. The boots would have to be laced and carried around their necks, though, for they

couldn't manage their flippers on the small island without them. It would be slow going, and unless someone reached the spaceship soon and found out why the Earthmen didn't leave it, the ship might become their funeral pyre. Augie knew instinctively that the hungrily licking flames had nothing to do with the pillar of fire on which the ship had descended. It was something else, it was wrong, and it meant trouble.

Augie floundered into the muddy swamp while the swampers were still unfastening their boots. Seeking out and finding the water channel which flowed sluggishly from north to south and quite close to the island on which the burning spaceship rested, Augie began to swim, exhaling the brackish water from his nose and mouth in sneezes and coughs.

It was a long, tiring five hundred yards to the small island. Yesterday, or even an hour ago, Augie would not have struck out on his own so boldly across swamper country. It was not that the swampers would stop him; instead, they would make fun of his awkward efforts to swim. Now, though, they had to unfasten their boots on the edge of the city and carry them along as they struck out for the island.

As Augie waded up on dry land, he saw the swampers treading water behind him, their boots draped across their necks, their broad flippers churning the muddy waters and keeping them afloat.

"Hurry," one of them said to Augie. "If you don't get them out of there soon, there won't be anything left to get out. We're right behind you, boy. But *hurry!*"

AUGIE RAN across the island toward the spaceship. This close, he expected it to be much larger. One side of the sphere, which was some fifty feet in diameter, was already enveloped in flames. Augie could feel the intense heat as he came closer. He realized that even at this distance, too much exposure to it would blister his skin. And he still had to get closer, assuming he could do anything to help the men who were evidently trapped inside.

The ship had not landed on its bottom. Augie could see half of the cylindrical rocket tubes exposed, covered with mud as if the ship had come down

properly and then fallen over on its side. Also covered with mud, half a dozen feet from the tube ends, was the airlock. The flames, which seemed to come from the very surface of the ship's hull, had begun to eat around to this side.

Augie recoiled from the terrible heat. His hands felt hot and clammy as if the fire was summoning the moisture from his body. If the people inside the ship hadn't come out, they were probably dead now anyway. Why should Augie risk his life in a futile attempt to save them?

Because they're my kind, Augie thought. Because they're plain, unfashioned Earthmen.

Because maybe—just maybe—they can take me back to Earth with them. The idea came to him now, unbidden. Although it surfaced to his awareness for the first time, he realized that it had been in the back of his mind ever since the announcement of the spaceship's coming.

The metal of the spaceship hull was so hot it shriveled Augie's skin on contact. He half-expected the airlock door to be stuck, but when he forced the huge bolt back, he heard the inner bolt slide with it. The door opened toward him, shedding hot, gummy, rubberoid insulation.

The corridor inside the ship was like a furnace. There was air inside, but Augie couldn't breathe in the fierce heat. He saw no smoke; apparently the fire was burning somehow on the outside of the ship only.

Augie staggered down the corridor toward the front of the ship, his feet painfully hot through the thin shoes he wore. He found the Earth people in the control cabin of the spaceship. There were three of them: a man, a woman and a girl of about fifteen. They were strapped to crash-hammocks and all three were unconscious.

Augie unstrapped the girl first, draped her limply across his shoulder and carried her unconscious form to the very edge of the island, as far from the burning ship as possible. One of the swampers, wearing partially fastened boots over his flippers, stumbled across the dry land to her. Augie ran back to the spaceship for the others. Unconscious, he had thought. He assumed they were unconscious. They could have been dead for all he knew.

The woman was somewhat heavier than the girl, but Augie

could manage her. His arms and legs trembled with the heat and the loss of salt and moisture from his body. When he went back a third time, he found he was too weak to carry the man. Instead, Augie dragged him from the burning ship. When he reached the airlock with his burden, swampers were standing there to help him. He remembered letting them take the man. He remembered—but vaguely—lurching outside the oven of the ship. Then he remembered nothing until much later.

"THE FIRE was in the temperature unit of the ship," Dr. Jack Peters explained to Augie the next day. Dr. Peters spoke strangely, the words more hurried but paradoxically less slurred than those with which Augie was familiar. "Refrigeration and heating, you know. A safety device will let the fire burn only one way, outside. Ordinarily, in space, that means no fire."

"Are you going back to Earth soon?" Augie asked. His hands were swathed in bandages and a soothing ointment had been applied to his feet at the Space City hospital. He was feeling fine.

Dr. Peters laughed. "Not in that ship. Not for a long time, if at all."

Just then Mrs. Peters and her daughter Nancy came into the room. "We heard what you did, young man," Mrs. Peters said. "We want to thank you."

Nancy smiled. "You'd think he were the Earthman, not us. They're all calling for him outside. They know he saved us. He's a regular hero."

"You mean the rollers?" Augie asked in surprise. "The rollers are saying that?"

"The city people, yes. Father will have years of work ahead of him here on Tolliver's Planet."

"It hardly matters if the ship can't be salvaged," Mrs. Peters said.

"Just what kind of doctor are you, Dr. Peters?" Augie wanted to know.

"I'm a social anthropologist, Augie."

"A what?"

"I study how people live together in different groupings. That's why Earth sent me out here to Tolliver's Planet. This experiment is unique, you know. I mean, the adapted, fashioned people."

"They don't like us unfashioned," Augie said. "They look

down at us and make fun of us."

Dr. Peters nodded. "You're different. You're peculiar. But deep down inside, Augie, they're envious. It's harmless enough if you don't let it get you down."

"Envious? Of the Hallers? The Muldoons? The Jacksons?"

"Envious, yes. You don't conform in adapted variations. What few of you people are left are real Earthmen. Who besides an unfashioned can live in your uplands, your swamps and your cities, wherever he chooses?"

"But the swampers can swim better than I can and the city folks, the rollers, can glide around their sidewalks all day without getting tired. And the uplanders—"

"They're all over-specialized. The experiment was tried here on Tolliver's Planet. No place else. Eventually, when another Earth ship picks me up, I'm going to recommend that the damage be undone in future generations. Of course, I may be jumping to conclusions, but there's plenty of time to verify or refute my judgment."

"He was the only one able to rescue us," Mrs. Peters said. "That's good enough for me."

At that moment, the door to the hospital room opened. Mayor Tompkins of Space City rolled into the room with two or three other men. The Mayor smiled at the Earth people and said polite things. Obviously, he was nervous and ill at ease.

"They'll all want to hear about Earth," he said finally. "All of our people."

"My wife should help in that," Dr. Peters said.

"You there, Haller," the Mayor said, turning to Augie. "On behalf of all Tolliver's Planet, I want to thank you for what you did yesterday. I guess you Hallers are a different breed from the Jacksons and Muldoons."

"No, sir," Augie answered. "We're the same. We're all Earthmen."

Mayor Tompkins frowned. "You are. You sure are. But what about the rest of us? Aren't we Earthmen, too?" There was a difference, Augie sensed. He was *being asked* for approval, not asking for it himself. He swelled his chest and said, "We're all Earthmen here."

Nancy said, "Someday maybe you can go back to Earth

with us, Augie. If you want."

But Mayor Tompkins shook his head. "He's an Earthman, but he's a Tolliver's man too. Aren't you, boy?"

"I guess so."

"Just why are your people living on that bad north land, anyway?"

"We thought we'd be intruders any place else."

The door opened, admitting another group of people. They were mostly rollers, but a few swampers came in too, and a pair of stilt-legged uplanders. They all shook Augie's hand as if they had met him—or one of his kind—for the first time.

"It would seem to me that if Mrs. Peters teaches us some of the Earth ways we've forgotten," the Mayor said, "it's Haller here and his people who can best get us started in the old ways again. Isn't that so, Haller?"

Augie nodded. His eyes were smarting. Suddenly, he saw the bent old man from the Fashioning Center in one corner of the room. The old man looked at him questioningly. The look said: I know it isn't legal, but if you still want to be fashioned, I think in this one case we can forget about your age.

But Augie was thinking of his father, another one of the unfashioned Earthmen on Tolliver's Planet, and of how his father's face would change with the feel of good south soil between his work-hardened fingers.

Augie looked steadily at the bent old man and shook his head.

THE END

TUNNEL 1971

by Charles Einstein

A short-short story

FROM THE Secret Log-Book of Professor Eustis Quinby, B.S., AAAS, A.H.S.T.F.:

March 7, 1970:

Professor Hilgud called. Very excited. Wants to see me right away. Tried to get him interested in my new philosophical thesis, "The Universality of Scientific Discovery," but he says his matter is much more pressing.

March 8, 1970:

Professor Hilgud has discovered brontium!!

March 10, 1970:

Brontium is a metallic element which can be mined economically in great quantities from shoreline deposits bordering any body of salt water. It is *completely insensitive to heat!*

March 22, 1970:

Cold war with Russia continues. Brontium discovery classified top secret.

March 29, 1970:

Great excitement in Washington. Discovery of brontium will enable man to travel as he has never traveled before... *through the earth!*

Professor Hilgud envisions rocket-propelled, cylindrical, three-rail "trains" traveling at six hundred miles per hour.

Can reduce point-to-point traveling distances by as much as thirty-three percent!

Once tunnels are built, only cost for upkeep will be maintenance of vehicles and price of fuel.

Airport-traffic, radio-control, personnel factors of air travel all eliminated, so no trouble—really no real competition in distance travel there. (Great-circle air route from New York to London nearly three thousand miles—down to about

two thousand by tunneling under the Atlantic Ocean.)

Can be all-weather traffic of course!

Great heat as one nears the center of the earth no factor, since brontium not only insensitive to heat but *insulates* as well!

Ventiliation to be a problem only in construction of tunnels, since all trains will be seal-ventilated.

March 31, 1970:

Big conference in Washington. Administration brass favors building first tunnel directly through center of earth, using brontium both as construction material and shield.

Idea is to tunnel through to Russia, coming out on vacant lot in Siberia, for movement of men and materials in case Reds start war. Cabinet members point out that Red radar is aimed at sky, not at ground, and therefore, inasmuch as tunnel will come out in unoccupied portion of Siberia, entire tunnel can be constructed without Soviets being aware.

April 9, 1970:

Professor Hilgud pointed out that any tunnel directed through center of earth from any point in U.S.A. would not come out in Russia, but in Pacific Ocean or Australia.

Also points out prevailing differences between pulls of actual gravity and magnetic gravity, which could pull men one way and metal another and make travelers on proposed routes sick as blazes.

Also points out possibility of unknown factors, such as what happens to a man traveling through the center of the earth where gravity is greatest, then going past it where gravity pulls directly opposite to way it pulled him *toward* earth's center.

April 11, 1970:

Possibility human being would turn inside out?

•

June 14, 1970:

Proposed tunnel to Russia will lie *north* (if that's the word, of the earth's center throughout. Will come out other side just north of Outer Mongolia line.

Entrance point in U.S. will be a place in eastern Pennsylvania.

September 4, 1970:

Secret construction work begins tomorrow. Perfected drilling equipment and abundance

of brontium makes completion within a year almost certain.

September 9, 1970:
Code name is Tunnel 1971, designating year of completion.

December 18, 1970:
Sandhogs' union wants to know what will happen to man who falls into tunnel?

Government experts say this mainly a problem for future tunnel directly through earth's center, in which conceivably man could fall, go past center till gravity pulls him back the other way, and continue like a yo-yo.

But excavation will illustrate whether, using brontium, interior of earth can be made habitable.

Professor Hilgud envisions a day when local trains as well as expresses may be feasible.

January 9, 1971:
They're off! Actual tunneling began today.

February 20, 1971:
Under Brooklyn Heights. All well.

May 6, 1971:
More than half way across the Atlantic.

June 4, 1971:
Cryptic message from Dr. Hilgud. All work stopped.

June 6, 1971:
The tunnel was about halfway completed when work was stopped. Seeking details.

June 9, 1971:
What happened was that a work crew of 50 men entered tunnel from Pennsylvania entrance on June first. On June third they returned, but of fifty workers, only forty-nine spoke English. Remaining man was someone none had ever seen before, and he talked nothing but Russian. Meanwhile, one of our own men was missing.

June 16, 1971:
Some incoherent babbling about meeting the Russians coming the other way, but nothing concrete. Professor Hilgud in seclusion.

July 2, 1971:
My philosophical thesis, "The Universality of Scientific Discovery," has become popular. Sales are up forty-three percent, and reports still coming in suggest that this is....

THE END

THE NIGHT EXPRESS

Time-tables were taboo on that streamlined special.

by Damon Knight

DUVEEN halted beside a railroad coach that looked newer than the rest. Its grooved sides were of aluminum, mirror-polished. Like a big house trailer, it hung low over the platform, promising stability and comfort. A steady hum came from the idling motors. The platform was empty and silent.

His luggage had been checked ahead. He carried only the dark leather briefcase. There was no one waiting to see him off; Duveen had said all his good-bys a long time ago. He stepped up into the vestibule.

Inside, the coach was even roomier than it had seemed. Broad, disk-shaped c e i l i n g lights illumined a row of tables and divans in the center of the car. Here and there, smaller, yellower seat lights glowed beneath green shades. The curved windows, which had seemed opaque from outside, were now perfectly transparent and without reflections. The seats were of ample size and well spaced. Duveen was not tired, but he noted with approval that by adjusting the footrests one could relax or even sleep in comfort.

He had barely settled himself with his briefcase and overcoat covering the other half of the seat when the coach began to fill. First came two soldiers in heavy-looking winter uniforms; they were fox-faced and slim, and carried barracks bags under their arms. Then a gray, haggard man, without a necktie but with his shirt collar turned up high around his throat. Then a studious-looking man with steel-rimmed glasses. He carried a huge, oblong case, covered with leatheroid or plastic, which was awkward to handle although it seemed light. Then a slovenly woman just out of her youth; the incongruous glint of a blue eye as she passed made Duveen aware that only a year ago she might have been pretty. Then three round, brown, bald men, as stout and hard as handballs, each with a briefcase, each with a scowl and a cigar. They appropriated one of the center tables at once; took off their hats and overcoats, loosened their ties, and began to play cards.

The lights dimmed for an instant. Duveen heard the whine of compressors up ahead, then the faint throb of idling motors. The doors sighed shut. There was a slight jolt, then another as the car picked up speed; then they were rolling smoothly, faster and faster under the platform lights, then the tunnel lights, into darkness. Duveen l o o k e d at his watch: 11:21. Not bad.

The windows were set higher than in an ordinary railway coach, and on the wall beneath each window there was a magazine rack, an ashtray and a second small rack containing sample packs of cigarettes, a timetable and a new deck of cards. Duveen thumbed up the magazines and let them drop again— *Time, Fortune,* the *Geographic.* He had seen them all, or, if not, magazines just like them. Besides, they re-

minded him too much of a doctor's waiting room.

The coach rushed on, with a steady and irresistible motion. It was a cloudy night; Duveen couldn't see much through the high windows. Once or twice some distant lights came into view, strung in mysterious beauty across the dark (but Duveen knew what tawdry streets and defeated people he would find there), and later they roared past the blank, ruddy-lighted wall of a factory into darkness again.

Inside, all the ceiling lights had gone out except that over the cardplayers' table. The soldiers across the aisle were talking in low voices. From the opposite corner the woman's pale eyes gleamed, fixed on the soldiers with a resentful appeal: an expression that seemed to say, *Talk to me so that I can put you in your place.*

The sounds of the car's motion had muffled themselves into a kind of throbbing silence. Duveen heard the sharp *tac* of cards being rapped on the tabletop, then the slithering sounds as they were dealt, and an occasional short word from one of the players.

He extended his footrest, stretched out, and closed his eyes. He was not sleepy. Through his head in an endless dull procession passed the gray figures from the stiff white papers in his briefcase. He had been studying them so long, beyond any interest or feeling, that now when he closed his eyes he was unable to stop their slow march across the field of his vision; it was as if he had lost the ability to distinguish the times when he was looking at the figures from the times when he was not. Then he realized that the columns of type had turned into nonsense, and he sat up again, pulling his cuffs tight around his wrists.

HE HAD the feeling that a long time had passed; he must have been dozing, after all. The soldiers were still sitting and talking together, the faded woman opposite was still eyeing them with a resentful, malevolent hunger; the card game was still going on. Up toward the front of the car, the man in the steel spectacles was doing something complex to the oblong box he held in his lap. The gray man was staring out the window. The coach was now mounting a long, gentle slope, steadily and swiftly ascending. The darkness was unbroken.

Feeling a little restless, Du-

veen rose and walked to the water cooler at the other end of the car. Only one clear drop came out. It hung from the tap without falling. Duveen was faintly annoyed, but, after all, he had not really been thirsty.

As he turned, the spectacled man looked up. He was about forty, neatly barbered but unkempt, with a desperately intelligent gleam in his eye. "Look here," he said, lifting the box from his lap, "have you ever seen anything like this?"

Duveen noticed for the first time that the box was scored with innumerable hair-thin lines which curved and broke in every direction, as if the box were assembled of many odd-shaped pieces, like a Chinese puzzle. "Wait, now, wait," said the spectacled man, and stared at the box, with both hands poised. He was like a nervous chess player, working out some intricate mental calculation. All at once his hands plunged, and the rigid thumbs pressed hard. Two curved sections of the box swung free. He laughed with triumph, and pushed the two sections back into place. "Now you do it," he said, offering the box to Duveen.

Politely, Duveen sat down and took the box on his lap. He pressed with his thumbs as he had seen the spectacled man do, but nothing happened.

"No, no," said the spectacled man impatiently, "different spots each time. You have to get them right, or it changes. Try again."

Duveen pressed again, at random, and again and again, but without success. He handed the box back. The spectacled man took it with his dry laugh, and poised his hands as before. Abruptly he pressed, and swung out two opposite corners of the box. "It takes practice," he said with satisfaction. "I can tell you're not an engineer, though."

"No," said Duveen. He got up and went back to his seat, past the fixed glare of the gray man.

The card-players looked up as he passed. The nearest of the three was shuffling the pack. "You play bridge?" he asked around his cigar.

"No," said Duveen. The card-player turned away glumly and slapped the pack down before the man on his right. "Deal," he said.

Duveen sat down in his place again. Once more the gray figures began their march, swaying, grotesquely altered. When was it that he had stopped caring whether this deal went

through or not? He remembered a moment in his office when he stood behind his desk, stuffing papers into the briefcase, and the two men looked at him silently in the gray afternoon light. Yes, that must have been it. He could not say why, but nothing had felt quite the same since, although his mind still went through the motions.

He adjusted his cuffs and picked up a newspaper that had dropped from the opposite seat. He leafed through it, but none of the stories he expected to find were there, and turning to the first page, he read the date, *September 11*. It was a mistake, evidently. Someone had got hold of tommorrow's newspaper. He looked at his watch. It was only 3:10.

A few drops of rain drove against the windows. Frost crystals formed, glittering like mica under the lights. After a few moments they began to melt away again, and shortly the windows were clear. The darkness was still intense, broken only by a few stars. The coach, still mounting the same interminable slope, hurtled smoothly on.

The newspaper bothered Duveen. Yesterday had been the ninth; late evening editions would be dated the tenth. He looked at his watch again, impelled by an uneasiness he could not define.

One of the soldiers leaned over and called, "Listen, you know what time we get into Pittsburgh?"

"No," said Duveen.

"We got jobs waiting for us in Pittsburgh," the boy said sadly. "We just got out of the Infantry." He turned away again, avoiding the woman's hungry gaze.

DUVEEN noticed the timetable in its rack. He picked it out and opened it, but could not find a table for trains west-bound from New York. The paper on which the timetable was printed was oddly gray and brittle, uncomfortable to touch. He turned back to the cover and read: *Great Northern Railway, Schedule of Trains, Effective November 1, 1887.*

The paper was flaking away in his hands. He thrust it back with distaste, and wiped his hands on his breast-pocket handkerchief. The incident was meaningless, of course, but he found it curiously upsetting.

Now that he thought of it, Duveen remembered that no conductor had come to punch

their tickets. They had seen no porters, either, and no passengers had come through on their way to other cars. It was just as if this coach had been cut off from the rest of the train.

Duveen did not smoke, but he picked out one of the sample packages of cigarettes and opened it. The paper tubes inside were not filled with tobacco, but with some dark-gray, powdery substance that spilled dryly over his fingers.

Wincing with disgust, he got up and went to the rear of the car. He followed the dogleg passage around to the vestibule. There he stopped; there was no way of going further. The only exit from the vestibule, except the one he had just come through, was the outside door to his left. Straight ahead, the wall was blank.

The corrugated floor trembled slightly, incessantly under the soles of his shoes. The car swayed; a little cold air seeped in from outdoors. There was no car beyond this one; or if there were, there was no way to reach it.

Impossible! The coach had been one of a long row; he remembered that clearly. Duveen pressed his nose to the glass of the outer door. He could see nothing but a vast sweep of cloudy darkness hanging below the coach, as if the car were ascending some huge trestle over a darkened plain. Above, only the stars.

Duveen shivered. As he turned to go back, a figure came toward him from the passageway. It was the gray man, gaunt and crooked, with his collar turned up high around his neck. His eyes gleamed disturbingly from their shadowed sockets, and his teeth showed in a dry grin.

Duveen involuntarily stepped back. The gray man bobbed and postured at him. He pointed to his own chest and made a sign which Duveen did not understand; then he flung up one bony hand and drew it across his throat. He pulled his collar aside, craning his neck at Duveen. Across the corded throat, as if the man's bare hand had been a knife, a bloodless wound gaped. It was an old wound. The tendons showed yellow-white in it; the skin at the lips of the wound was pale and dead; there was no blood at all.

While Duveen stared, the gray man made a final despairing gesture and turned to the outside door. He wrenched it open, admitting a blast of icy

air, and was gone. Duveen saw him drop as the door slammed behind him. After a paralyzed moment he went to the window and stared out; there was nothing but the distant, darkened plain and the stars.

Duveen felt empty and ill. He went back into the coach and sat down. Everything was just as before; the woman staring at the soldiers, the three men playing cards, the spectacled man playing with his puzzle box. In its steady, swift, onward rush through the night, the coach did not even vibrate any longer, but only rocked gently from side to side.

A DOOR slammed. A figure appeared in the passageway at the far end of the car, and Duveen thought, *At last, the conductor!*

It was the gray man.

His hands and his clothes were stained with a brown thick substance, like the mixture of dust and grease that covers the under parts of railway cars. He stood swaying in the doorway for a moment, his face drawn into lines of hopelessness, then sat down in his place. The spectacled man did not look up from his puzzled box. The card-players went on playing.

Duveen stood up. At the entrance to the passage he hesitated, for fear the gray man might follow him again, but the latter only sat with elbows on knees, hunched and silent, staring out the window as before. Duveen looked long at him, and at the other passengers, sitting in the pale light like mannikins propped erect. He knew that the gray man, at least, was dead. Was it possible that death took a long time to happen—perhaps forever?

He turned and followed the passage to the empty vestibule. He swung the door back and put his head out.

The air was freezing cold, with a brittle fur of ice crystals in it. There was no wind and no feeling of movement. The enormous plain of darkness was very far below, now. Here and there, Duveen thought he could make out tiny patterns of light, almost too distant to be seen.

There was nothing else under the wheels: nothing before, nothing behind. Leaning out, Duveen saw that the coach was hurtling all by itself through vacancy, like a great silver rocket. The sky was black. Directly ahead, there was one intensely bright, yel-

(Continued on Page 99)

MARK XI

by Cordwainer Smith

The art of war should change mightily in the next thirteen thousand years, but not even Carlotta from the Third Reich seemed likely to benefit from the marvelous Menschenjager — until the Middle-Sized Bear intervened! A wonderfully wacky story of a possible—but we hope improbable—future.

STARS WHEELED silently over an early summer sky, even though men had long ago forgotten to call such nights by the name of June.

Laird tried to watch the stars with his eyes closed. It was a ticklish and terrifying game for a telepath: at any moment he might feel the heavens opening up and might, as his mind touched the image of the nearer stars, plunge himself into a nightmare of perpetual falling. Whenever he had this sickening, shocking, ghastly, suffocating feeling of limitless fall, he had to close his mind against telepathy long enough to let his powers heal.

He was reaching with his mind for objects just above the Earth, burned-out space stations which flitted in their multiplex orbits, spinning forever, left over from the wreckage of ancient atomic wars.

He found one.

Found one so ancient it had no surviving electronic controls. Its design was archaic beyond belief. Chemical tubes had apparently once lifted it out of earth's atmosphere.

He opened his eyes and promptly lost it.

Closing his eyes, he groped again with his seeking mind until he found the ancient derelict. As his mind reached for it again, the muscles of his jaw tightened. He sensed life within it, life as old as the archaic machine itself.

In an instant, he made contact with his friend Tong Computer.

He poured his knowledge

into Tong's mind. Keenly interested, Tong shot back at him an orbit which would cut the mildly parabolic pattern of the old device and bring it back down into Earth's atmosphere.

Laird made a supreme effort.

Caling on his unseen friends to aid him, he searched once more through the rubbish that raced and twinkled unseen just above the sky. Finding the ancient machine he managed to give it a push.

In this fashion, about thirteen thousand years after she left Hitler's Reich, Carlotta vom Acht began her return to the earth of men.

In all those years, she had not changed.

Earth had.

THE ANCIENT rocket tipped. Four hours later it had begun to graze the stratosphere, and its ancient controls, preserved by cold and time against all change, went back into effect. As they thawed, they became activated.

The course flattened out.

Fifteen hours later, the rocket was seeking a destination.

Electronic controls which had really been dead for thousands of years, out in the changeless time of space itself, began to look for German territory, seeking the territory by feedbacks which selected out characteristic Nazi patterns of electronic communications scramblers.

There were none.

How could the machine know this? The machine had left the town of Pardubice, on April 2, 1945, just as the last German hideouts were being mopped up by the Red Army. How could the machine know that there was no Hitler, no Reich, no Europe, no America, no nations? The machine was keyed to German codes. Only German codes.

This did not affect the feedback mechanisms.

They looked for German codes anyhow. There were none. The electronic computer in the rocket began to go mildly neurotic. It chattered to itself like an angry monkey, rested, chattered again, and then headed the rocket for something which seemed to be vaguely electrical. The rocket descended and the girl awoke.

She knew she was in the box in which her daddy had placed her. She knew that she was not a cowardly swine like the Nazis whom her father despised. She was a good Prussian girl of noble military fam-

ily. She had been ordered to stay in the box by her father. What daddy told her to do, she had always done. That was the first kind of rule for her kind of girl, a sixteen year old of the Junker class. The noise increased.

The electronic chattering flared up into a wild medley of clicks.

She could smell something perfectly dreadful burning, something awful and rotten like flesh. She was afraid that it was herself, but she felt no pain.

"*Vadi, vadi,* what is happening to me?" she cried to her father.

(Her father had been dead thirteen thousand and more years. Obviously enough, he did not answer.)

The rocket began to spin. The ancient leather harness holding her broke loose. Even though her section of the rocket was no bigger than a coffin, she was cruelly bruised.

She began to cry.

She vomited, though very little came up. Then she slid in her own vomit and felt nasty and ashamed.

The noises all met in a screaming, shrieking climax. The last thing she remembered was the firing of the forward decelerators. The metal had become fatigued so that the tubes not only fired forward, but blew themselves to pieces sidewise as well.

She was unconscious when the rocket crashed. Perhaps that saved her life, since the least muscular tension would have led to the ripping of muscle and the crack of bone.

HIS METALS and plumes beamed in the moonlight as he scampered about the dark forest in his gorgeous uniform. The government of the world had long since been left to the Morons by the True Men who had no interest in such things as politics or administration.

Carlotta's weight, not her conscious will, tripped the escape handle.

Her body lay half in, half out of the rocket.

She had gotten a bad burn on her left arm where her skin touched the hot outer surface of the rocket.

The Moron parted the bushes and approached.

"I am the Lord High Administrator of Area 73," he said, identifying himself according to the rules.

The unconscious girl did not answer. He raised up close to the rocket, crouching low lest of

the dangers of the night devour him, and listened intently to the radiation counter built under the skin of his skull behind his left ear. He lifted the girl dexterously, flung her gently over his shoulder, turned about, ran back into the bushes, made a right-angle turn, ran a few paces, looked about him undecidedly, and then ran (still uncertain, still rabbit-like) down to the brook.

He reached into his pocket and found a Burn Balm. He applied a thick coating to the burn on her arm. It would stay, killing the pain and protecting the skin until the burn was healed.

He splashed cool water on her face. She awakened.

"Wo bin ich?" said she in German.

On the other side of the world, Laird, the telepath, had forgotten for the moment about the rocket. He might have understood her, but he was not there. The forest was around her and the forest was full of life, fear, hate, and pitiless destruction.

THE MORON babbled in his own language.

She looked at him and thought that he was a Russian.

She said in German, "Are you a Russian? Are you a German? Are you part of General Vlassov's army? How far are we from Prague? You must treat me courteously. I am an important girl...."

Moron stared at her.

His face began to grin with innocent and consummate lust. (The True Men had never felt it necessary to inhibit the breeding habits of Morons between the Beasts, the Unforgiven, and the Menschenjagers. It was hard for any kind of a human being to stay alive. The True Men wanted the Morons to go on breeding, to carry reports, to gather up a few necessaries, and to distract the other inhabitants of the world enough to let the True Men have the quiet and contemplation which their exalted but weary temperaments demanded.)

This Moron was typical of his kind. To him food meant eat, water meant drink, woman meant lust.

He did not discriminate.

Weary, confused, and bruised though she was, Carlotta still recognized his expression.

Thirteen thousand years ago she had expected to be raped or murdered by the Russians. This soldier was a fantastic little man, plump and grinning,

with enough medals for a Soviet colonel general. From what she could see in the moonlight he was clean-shaven and pleasant, but he looked innocent and stupid to be so high ranking an officer. Perhaps the Russians were all like that, she thought.

He reached for her.

Tired as she was, she slapped him.

The Moron was confused. He knew that he had the right to capture any Moron woman whom he might find. Yet he also knew that it was worse than death to touch any woman of the True Men. Which was this—this thing—this power—this entity who had descended from the stars?

Pity is as old an emotion as lust. As his lust receded, his elemental human pity took over. He reached in his jerkin pocket for a few scraps of food.

He held them out to her.

She ate, looking at him trustfully, very much the child.

Suddenly there was a crashing in the woods.

CARLOTTA wondered what had happened.

When she first saw him, his face was full of concern; then he had grinned and talked. Later he had become lustful. Finally he had acted very much the gentleman. Now he looked blank, brain and bone and skin all concentrated into the act of listening—listening for something else, beyond the crashing, which she could not hear. He turned back to her.

"You must run. You must run. Get up and run. I tell you, *run!*"

She listened to his babble without comprehension.

Once again he crouched to listen.

He looked at her with blank horror on his face. Carlotta tried to understand what was the matter, but she could not riddle his meaning.

Three more strange little men dressed exactly like him came crashing out of the woods.

They ran like elk or deer before a forest fire. Their faces were blank with the exertion of running. Their eyes looked straight ahead so that they seemed almost blind. It was a wonder that they evaded the trees. They came crashing down the slope, scattering leaves as they ran. They splashed the waters of the brook as they stomped recklessly through it. With a half animal cry, Carlotta's Moron joined them.

The last she saw of him, he

was running away into the woods, his plumes grinning ridiculously as his head nodded with the exertion of running.

From the d i r e c t i o n from which the Morons had come, an unearthly creepy sound whistled through the woods. It was a whistling, stealthy and low, accompanied by the humming sound of machinery.

The noise sounded like all the tanks in the world compressed into the living ghost of one tank, into the heart of a machine which survived its own destruction and, spirit-like, haunted the scenes of old battles.

As the sound approached Carlotta turned toward it. She tired to stand up and face the danger, but she could not rise. (All Prussian girls, destined to be the mothers of officers, were taught to face danger and never to turn their backs on it.) As the noise came close to her she could hear the high crazy inquiry of soft electronic chatter. It resembled the sonar she had once heard in her father's laboratory at the Reich's secret offices.

The machine came out of the woods.

And it did look like a ghost.

CARLOTTA stared at the machine. It had legs like a grasshopper, body like a ten-foot turtle, and three heads which moved restlessly in the moonlight.

From the forward edge of the top shell a hidden arm leaped forth, seeming to strike at her, deadlier than a cobra, quicker than a jaguar, more silent than a bat flitting across the face of the moon.

"Don't!" Carlotta screamed in German. The arm stopped so s u d d e n l y that the metal twanged like the string of a bow.

The heads of the machine all turned toward her.

Something like s u r p r i s e seemed to overtake the machine. The whistling dropped down to a soothing purr. The electronic chatter burst up to a crescendo and then stopped. The machine dropped to its knees.

Carlotta crawled over to it.

She said in German, "What are you?"

"I am the death of all men who oppose the Sixth German Reich," said the machine in fluted singsong German. "If the Reichsangehoeriger wishes to identify me, my model and number are written on my carapace."

The machine knelt at a height so low that Carlotta could seize one of the heads and look in the moonlight at the edge of the top shell. The head and neck, though made of metal, felt much more weak and brittle than she expected. There was about the machine an air of immense age.

"I can't see," wailed Carlotta. "I need a light."

There was the ache and grind of long unused machinery. Another mechanical arm appeared, dropping flakes of near-crystallized dirt as it moved. The tip of the arm exuded light, blue, penetrating and strange.

Brook, forest, small valley, machine, even Carlotta were all lit up by the soft penetrating blue light which did not hurt her eyes. The light even gave her a sense of well-being. With it she could read. Traced on the carapace just above the three heads was this inscription:

Waffenamt Des Sechsten Deutschen Reiches Burg Eisenhower. A. D. 2495.

And then below it, in much larger Latin letters:

MENSCHENJAGER MARK ELF

"What does Man-hunter, Model Eleven, mean?"

"That's me," whistled the machine. "How is it you don't know me if you are a German?"

"Of course, I'm a German, you fool!" said Carlotta. "Do I look like a Russian?"

"What is a Russian?" said the machine.

Carlotta stood in the blue light wondering, dreaming, dreading—dreading the unknown which had materialized around her.

WHEN HER father, Heinz Horst Ritter vom Acht, professor and doctor of mathematical physics at project Nordnacht, had fired her into the sky before he himself waited a gruesome death at the hands of the Soviet soldiery, he had told her nothing about the Sixth Reich, nothing about what she might meet, nothing about the future. It came to her mind that perhaps the world was dead, that she was in heaven or hell, herself being dead; or, if herself alive, she was in some other world, or her own world in the future. These were things beyond all human ken, problems which no mind could solve.... She fainted again.

The Menschenjager could not know that she was uncon-

scious and had addressed her in serious, high-pitch singsong German, "German citizen, have confidence that I will protect you. I am built to identify German thoughts and to kill all men who do not have true German thoughts."

The machine hesitated. A loud chatter of electronic clicks echoed across the silent woods while the machine tried to compute its own mind. It was not easy to select from the long-unused store of words the right words for so ancient and yet so new a situation. The machine stood in its own blue light. The only sound was the sound of the brook moving irresistably about its gentle and unliving business. Even the birds in the trees and the insects round about were hushed into silence by the presence of the dreaded whistling machine.

To the sound-receptors of the Menschenjager, the running of the Morons, by now some two miles distant, came as a very faint pitter-patter.

The machine was torn between two duties, the long-current and familiar duty of killing all men who were not German, and the ancient and forgotten duty of succoring all Germans, whoever they might be.

After another period of electronic chatter, the machine began to speak again. Beneath the grind of its singsong German there was a curious warning, a reminder of the whistle which it made as it moved, a sound of immense mechanical and electronic effort.

Said the machine, "You are German. It has been long since there has been a German anywhere. I have gone around the world two thousand three hundred and twenty-eight times. I have killed seventeen thousand four hundred and sixty-nine enemies of the Sixth German Reich for sure, and I have probably killed forty-two thousand and seven additional ones. I have been back to the Automatic Restoration Center eleven times. The enemies who call themselves the True Men always elude me. I have not killed one of them for more than three thousand years. The ordinary men whom some call the Unforgiven are the ones I kill most of all, but frequently I catch Morons and kill them, too. I am fighting for Germany, but I cannot find Germany anywhere. There are no Germans in Germany. There are no Germans anywhere. I accept orders from no one but a German. Yet there have been no Germans anywhere, no Ger-

mans anywhere, no Germans anywhere...."

CARLOTTA came to as the machine was dreamily talking to itself, repeating with sad and lunatic intensity, *"No Germans anywhere..."*

Said she, "I'm a German."

"...no Germans anywhere, no Germans anywhere, except you, except you..."

The mechanical voice ended in a thin screech.

Carlotta tried to come to her feet.

At last the machine found words again. "What—do—I—do—now?"

"Help me," said Carlotta firmly.

This command seemed to tap an operable feedback in the ancient assembly: "I cannot help you, member of the Sixth German Reich. For that you need a rescue machine. I am not a rescue machine. I am a hunter of men, designed to kill all the enemies of the German Reich."

"Get me a rescue machine then," said Carlotta.

The blue light went off, leaving Carlotta standing blinded in the dark. She was shaky on her legs. The voice of the Menschen jager came to her.

"I am not a rescue machine. There are no rescue machines. There are no rescue machines anywhere. There are no Germans anywhere, no Germans anywhere, no Germans anywhere, except you. You must ask a rescue machine. Now I go. I must kill men. Men who are the enemies of the Sixth German Reich. That is all I can do. I can fight forever. I shall find a man and to kill him. Then I must kill men. Men who are the enemies of the Sipth German Reich. That is all I can do. I can fight forever. I shall find a man and kill him. Then I shall find another man and kill him. I depart on the work of the Sixth German Reich."

The whistling and clicking resumed.

With incredible daintiness, the machine stepped as lightly as a cat across the brook. Carlotta listened intently in the darkness. Even the dry leaves of last year did not stir as the Menschenjager moved through the shadow of the fresh leafy trees.

Abruptly there was silence.

Carlotta could hear the agonized clickety-clack of the computers in the Menschenjager. The forest became a weird silhouette as the blue light went back on.

The machine returned.

STANDING on the far side of the brook, it spoke to her in the dry, highfluted singing German voice:

"Now that I have found a German I will report to you once every hundred years. That is correct. Perhaps that is correct. I do not know. I was built to report to officers. You are not an officer. Nevertheless you are a German. So I will report every hundred years. Meanwhile, watch out for the Kaskaskia Effect."

Carlotta, sitting again, was chewing some of the dry food cubes which the Moron had left behind. They tasted like a mockery of chocolate. With her mouth full, she tried to shout to the Menschenjager, *"Was ist das?"*

Apparently the machine understood, because it answered, "The Kaskaskia Effect is an American weapon. The Americans are all gone. There are no Americans anywhere, no Americans anywhere—"

"Stop repeating yourself," said Carlotta. "What is that effect you are talking about?"

"The Kaskaskia Effect stops the Menschenjagers, stops the True Men, stops the Beasts. It can be sensed, but it cannot be seen or measured. It moves like a cloud. Only simple men with clean thoughts and happy lives can live inside it. Birds and ordinary beasts can live inside it, too. The Kaskaskia Effect moves about like clouds. There are more than twenty-one and less than thirty-four Kaskaskia Effects moving slowly about this planet Earth. I have carried other Menschenjagers back for restoration and rebuilding, but the restoration center can find no fault. The Kaskaskia Effect ruins this. Therefore, we run away...even though the officers told us to run from nothing. If we did not run away, we would cease to exist. You are a German. I think the Kaskaskia Effect would kill you. Now I go to hunt a man. When I find him I will kill him."

The blue light went off.

The machine whistled and clicked its way into the dark silence of the wooded night.

CARLOTTA was completely adult.

She had left the screaming uproar of Hitler Germany as it fell to ruins in its Bohemian outposts. She had obeyed her father, the Ritter vom Acht, as he passed her and her sisters into missiles which had been designed as personnel and supply carriers for the First Ger-

man National Socialist Moon Base.

He and his medical brother, Professor Doctor Joachim vom Acht, had harnessed the girls securely in their missiles. Their uncle the Doctor had given them shots. Karla had gone first, then Juli, and then Carlotta.

Then the barbed wired fortress of Pardubice and the monotonous grind of Wermacht trucks trying to escape the air strikes of the Red Air Force and the American fighter bombers died in the one night, and this mysterious "forest in the middle of nothing-at-all" was born in the next night.

Carlotta was completely dazed. She found a smooth-looking place at the edge of the brook. The old leaves were heaped high here. Without regard for further danger, she slept.

She had not been asleep more than a few minutes before the bushes parted again.

This time it was a bear. The bear stood at the edge of the darkness and looked into the moonlit valley with the brook running through it. He could hear no sound of Morons, no whistle of manshonyagger, as he and his kind called the hunting machines. When he was sure all was safe, he twitched his claws and reached delicately into a leather bag which was hanging from his neck by a thong. Gently he took out a pair of spectacles and fitted them slowly and carefully in front of his tired old eyes.

He then sat down next to the girl and waited for her to wake up.

SUNLIGHT and birdsong awakened her.

(Or could it have been the probing of Laird's mind, whose far-reaching senses told him that a woman had magically and mysteriously emerged from the archaic rocket and that there was a human being unlike all the other kinds of mankind waking at a brookside in a place which had once been called Maryland?)

Carlotta awoke, but she was sick.

She had a fever.

Her back ached.

Her eyelids were almost stuck together with foam. The world had had time to develop all sorts of new allergenic substances since she had last walked on the surface of the Earth. Four civilizations had come and vanished. They and their weapons were sure to leave membrane-inflaming resi-

due behind.

Her skin itched.

Her stomach felt upset.

Her arm was numb and covered with some kind of sticky black. She did not know it was a burn covered by the salve which the Moron had given her the previous night.

Her clothes were dry and seemed to be falling off her in shreds.

She felt so bad that when she noticed the bear, she did not even have strength to run.

She just closed her eyes again.

Lying there with her eyes closed she wondered all over again where she was.

Said the bear in perfect German, "You are at the edge of the Unselfing Zone. You have been rescued by a Moron. You have stopped a Menschenjager very mysteriously. For the first time in my own life I can see into a German mind and I see that the word 'manshonyagger' should really be 'Menschenjager,' a hunter of men. Allow me to introduce myself. I am the Middle-Sized Bear who lives in these woods."

The voice not only spoke German, but it spoke exactly the right kind of German. The voice sounded like the German which Carlotta had heard throughout her life from her father. It was a masculine voice, confident, serious, reassuring. With her eyes still closed she realized that it was a bear who was doing the talking. With a start, she recalled that the bear had been wearing spectacles.

Said she, sitting up, "What do you want?"

"Nothing," said the bear mildly.

They looked at each other for a while.

"Then," said Carlotta, "who are you? Where did you learn German? What's going to happen to me?"

"Does the Fraulein," asked the bear, "wish me to answer the questions in order?"

"Don't be silly," said Carlotta. "I don't care what order. Anyhow, I'm hungry. Do you have anything I could eat?"

The bear responded gently, "You wouldn't like hunting for insect grubs. I have learned German by reading your mind. Bears like me are the friends of the True Men and we are good telepaths. The Morons are afraid of us, but we are afraid of the manshonyaggers. Anyhow, you don't have to worry very much because your husband is coming soon."

CARLOTTA had been walking down toward the brook to get a drink. His last words stopped her in her tracks.

"My *husband?*" she gasped.

"So probable that it is certain. There is a True Man named Laird who has brought you down. He already knows what you are thinking, and I can see his pleasure in finding a human being who is wild and strange, but not really wild and not really strange. At this moment he is thinking that you may have left the centuries to bring the gift of vitality back among mankind. He is thinking that you and he will have very wonderful children. Now he is telling me not to tell you what I think he thinks, for fear that you will run away." The bear chuckled.

Carlotta stood, her mouth agape.

"You may sit in my chair," said the Middle-Sized Bear, "or you can wait here until Laird comes to get you. Either way you will be taken care of. Your sickness will heal. Your ailments will go away. You will be happy again. I know this because I am one of the wisest of all known bears."

Carlotta was angry, confused, frightened, and sick again. She started to run.

Something as solid as a blow hit her.

She knew without being told that it was the bear's mind reaching out and encompassing hers.

It hit—*boom!*—and that was all.

She had never before stopped to think of how comfortable a bear's mind was. It was like lying in a great big bed and having mother take care of her when she was a very little girl, glad to be petted and sure of getting well.

The anger poured out of her. The fear left her. The sickness began to lighten. The morning seemed beautiful.

She herself felt beautiful as she turned....

Out of the blue sky, dropping swiftly but gracefully, came the figure of a bronze young man. A happy thought pulsed against her mind, "That is Laird, my beloved. He is coming. He is coming. I shall be happy forever after."

And so she was.

THE END

MR. FRIGHTFUL

by Charles A. Stearns

There are still things in this world not yet classified by the zoologists — things like the Porglies that only a lunatic would admit existed. And that was why the man who called himself Mr. Frightful was proud to be known as a Mad Scientist!

SUBTLY, the adventure began at dusk, when Mindy crossed over into the forbidden ground of the old churchyard to look for Patino, her pet duck.

Strictly speaking, as Mindy's literal-minded, druggist father had observed, Patino was not really a duck, but a drake. Ducks quack; drakes do not. Patino had never quacked; therefore he was a drake. At any rate, being an industrious example of that ankle-nibbling species, he bit everyone in sight.

Cousin Marcia had arrived to spend the weekend with Mindy's parents, and Patino always considered her ankles a delicacy. Whenever he came near, Cousin Marcia was wont to scream—if there were any protective males around—and hoist her skirts skyward, for her knees were fetchingly dimpled. But if there was no audience, she simply kicked the living daylights out of him with a minimum of histrionics.

Actually, Patino was a very sentimental drake—his nips were love-nips, his feelings easily wounded—and after several such unfortunate encounters this morning, he had gone off with ruffled feathers.

Choosing between hysteria and concerted action, Mindy had set out to look for him.

It was the first Saturday in April. The evening was warm, the breeze heady with the smell of growing things, and despite her anxiety she had felt giddy and springified until the high

old fence, and the still-naked forsythia, and the tall, gray markers were suddenly around her, shutting out spring, and time, and the breath of new life that had been in the air a moment before.

She had saved the churchyard until last because it was the dominion of Mr. Gaup, the mortician who lived next door. A bleak look had Mr. Gaup, and all of the neighborhood children were afraid of him.

He lived with his wife in a gloomy old house behind his funeral parlor, which had once been an Episcopalian church. The abandoned building had been converted from the use of the living to the needs of the dead, but the churchyard had not been touched, and remained a part of the past with its granite slabs, too familiar to hold any symbolic dread for Mindy.

Mr. Gaup was not a very successful mortician. The elbows of his black coat were shiny and his patent leather shoes were badly eroded, though the heels, never touching the floor, were as good as new.

Such poverty in a traditionally lucrative business must necessarily be viewed with suspicion, making business still worse. It was said that Mr. Gaup's lack of popularity stemmed from the fact that he looked too much like an undertaker.

In truth, the Gaups were kind-hearted people who, in order to eke out their income in a Christian manner, selflessly took in sick and homeless old pensioners now and again, nursing each one faithfully until he was, as Mr. Gaup piously phrased it, "gathered Home to his Heavenly Reward".

For these charitable acts, the Gaups asked but little in return. Only the amount of the pension, and the pensioner's insurance made out to them, in order to cover burial costs. Oddly enough the insurance had always covered them. Just barely.

THE PATTERN of these sporadic acts of mercy, she recalled, had always been the same. Several years ago there'd been Mr. Schleyer. She scarcely remembered him. And after him, Uncle Billy Freeman, the dear old thing, who had bought her comic books, ocarinas and jigsaw puzzles, and had once told her that he was quite rich and had a big leather purse full of one-hundred dollar bills under his mattress.

The purse had been found,

but it was quite empty, Mr. Gaup said.

That had been the year that the potato bugs were so bad in Mr. Gaup's victory garden, and he had bought considerable Paris green from her father's drugstore.

And Josiah Marsh, the last, who, despite his last request, had been buried without his gold watch. Apparently he had managed to lose it just before his funeral. (That was a bad year for potato bugs, too.)

Each of these old men had loved life, and Uncle Billy, in particular, had rebelled against being Gathered Home, she recalled, and fought every step of the way.

Nevertheless, fate had struck them down, and now the Gaups had another boarder. It was said that he called himself Mr. Zee, and no one except the Widow Rasch, who owned a spyglass, had ever seen him, for he never left his attic room, and even, Mrs. Gaup complained, demanded that his food be brought up on a tray and left outside the door. Mr. Zee, whose origin was obscure, was the object of speculation.

But these dark thoughts did not concern Mindy, for the fate of Patino remained in question.

She had looked under all of the forsythia and the bridal wreath that grew rankly in the churchyard, but there was no familiar blob of white, no amiable, drakish scolding sound, no greeting from out of the dusk.

And at last she brought up against the dark, lonely structure which had once been the vestry of the old church and now was used for the storage of old crates and cartons which had accumulated around the funeral home. (Once she had thought it contained stacks of coffins, row on row, and possibly carboys of formaldehyde, but that had been a childish fantasy.)

Still, it was no place to venture at dusk. Several of its windowpanes were broken, and gaped blackly. The door sagged on its hinges. Testing her courage, she opened it and went in.

And found herself suddenly face to face with him who had been standing, all the while, just inside in the shadows.

MINDY SPRANG for the door, stumbled and fell over a box, and gave a little cry of pain and terror.

"Ssh!" the little man said earnestly, picking her up and setting her on her feet. He had flowing gray hair and he wore a quaint old cloak such as she

had seen in historic prints.

Mindy wailed, "But I want my d—"

Savagely he clamped a hand over her mouth and held her, mute and trembling, for a moment, seeming to test the night sounds around them. She faintly heard the spring peepers over in Miner's duckpond.

"It's all right," he said at last, releasing her. "Now then, young lady, who are you, and why do you come here?"

"I'm Mindy, and I live next door. I'm looking for my duck."

"It isn't here. Only Mr. Frightful is here, and Mr. Frightful is not a duck."

"That's a very odd name. Is it *your* name?"

"It is the *nom de guerre* that I use when hunting Porglies, much as Edward Teach used that famous epithet, 'Blackbeard,' and Wetzel, the Indian killer bore the appellation of 'Deathwind.' It has a psychological effect upon the enemy, you know. Terrorizes them."

"What's your real name?"

"Benjamin Franklin."

Mindy giggled.

"Did you *giggle?*" he said. It was very quiet in the vestry.

"No sir," said Mindy.

"Are you quite certain that you did not giggle?"

"Only a teeny-weeny bit," Mindy said. Her lower lip began to quiver.

"Weeping will not help," the little man said. "Just try to be more respectful. I'm a Mad Scientist, you know." He drew himself proudly erect, giving his cloak a Napoleonesque drape.

"Ooh!" said Mindy, respectfully faking an accent of awe.

The grey little man had lapsed into a moody silence, and appeared to have forgotten all about her. She took a step toward the door.

"You don't believe me," he said, so abruptly that his voice halted her in a state of near-suspended animation.

"Oh—oh yes," Mindy said, her eyes round as saucers. "I believe you."

"Piffle! You don't believe me; no one ever believes me. Why not admit that you never even heard of the Porglies, you hypocrital little snip!"

"Are they like Martians?" Mindy whispered.

"Indeed not. They're terrestrial in origin, and include a rather extensive, though almost unknown, order of humanoid invertebrates. They are, in fact, akin to the lepidoptera, and hence mimics of the highest degree."

"Oh," said Mindy, in complete bewilderment.

"Yes, and very nasty fellows, too. Completely amoral. As a matter of fact, I once wrote a scientific paper on Porglies and their habits— I was a professor of psychical research at one of the midwestern universities at the time. And do you know what *that* got me?" He glared at her with malignant intensity.

Mindy shook her head.

"It got me put away," said Mr. Frightful sourly. "It got me the booby hatch, much to the delight of the Porglies, who revel in their anonymity. I had been their nemesis for years, you know, and I am sure they all breathed a sigh of relief when they heard that I was locked up."

"I'm sorry they locked you up," Mindy said.

"Pah!" said Mr. Frightful. "I can escape any time I feel like it. I have my scouts, young lady, who keep me informed on the movements of the Porglies. I got four last month."

"You did?" said Mindy. "Are you looking for Porglies now?"

Mr. Frightful's voice took on a tone of elaborate sarcasm. "Did you think I was hunting fireflies?" he said.

"No," said Mindy, "but—"

"There has been a Porglie hiding somewhere in this neighborhood for months; I am sure of it."

Mindy shivered. "Are they dangerous?"

"Quite dangerous after the spring ecdysis. I—" He suddenly cocked his small head to one side. "Sst!" he said. "Is that a car?"

Mindy went over to the window. "It's a car all right," she said, "and it's coming up the processional lane. Now there are two men getting out—*and they're coming this way.*"

"Quickly! How are they dressed?"

"In white uniforms, it looks like."

"Damnation!" said Mr. Frightful. "Be very quiet. Perhaps they'll go away."

But the two men had flashlights with which they kept searching the ground ahead of them.

"My cowboy boots must have given me away," Mr. Frightful whispered. "Don't make a sound."

MINDY TRIED hard, but there is something about imposed silence that makes the nose itch horribly. Or, to be charitable, perhaps it was the dust of the ages in that old

vestry that did it. She sneezed.

The flashlights stopped probing.

A voice shouted, "Come on out, Benjamin Franklin. We know you're in there!"

"*Now* you've done it," muttered the little man.

"Are you coming out, or do we have to come in after you?"

"I'm coming!" Mr. Frightful snapped. He gathered his cloak around him as if the night was suddenly cold.

"I'm sorry," Mindy whispered. "I didn't mean to give you away. I'll never forget you, Mr. Frightful."

"I'll be back," said Mr. Frightful haughtily. "Meanwhile, I'd appreciate it, young woman, if you kept your eyes open. You appear to have just a glimmer of intelligence, and I shall need *human* spies. Yes indeed. A Porglie in this season often— *Yes, yes! I'm coming!*"

Quite without leavetaking he was gone, and she went over to the broken window to watch them melt into the dusk, the small, erect figure between the tall guards.

The stillness of the old vestry was suddenly profound, and she became aware of something here in the darkness that she had not recognized until this moment.

Fear.

The funny little man was gone, and with him that impossible tale of super-beings, or whatever they were, in the Earth. Porglies indeed! Mindy considered herself a sophisticate, much too old to believe in fairy stories.

Why fear then? Was it because he had sounded so dreadfully earnest in those last few moments before they had come for him?

Suppose that some obscure little scientist *should* one day stumble onto a minor race of intelligent beings who had somehow eluded the eyes of man for thousands of years— wouldn't he be so judged? Would anyone believe him? *Would anyone believe me,* Mindy thought, *if I should tell what happened tonight?*

The origin of her uneasiness was suddenly quite plain to her.

Mindy knew—subconsciously had known for several moments—that she was not alone in the vestry.

Someone — *something* — lay back there in the darkness, with mocking eyes upon her shoulder blades. Perhaps even now inching around through the shadows to get between her and

the door. Or stalking her from behind. . .

But what nonsense was that! She stood very quietly in one spot and listened.

And presently came a slight rustling from among the crates and rubbish that were piled in that blackest corner over there. There *was* something back there! Mr. Frightful had been horribly right.

She sprang for the door and did not stop running until she was home in her father's lap.

TWO WEEKS dragged by without incident for Mindy, except that the days were growing longer, and the school term nearing its close. Patino had apparently disappeared forever, for none of the neighbors had seen him, though she made the rounds night after night. Her father, trying to cheer her up, said that he might have gone north with the wild ducks, but that was silly.

There was the possibility, however, that he had been run over by an automobile. Or stolen.

Of late she had found herself drawn, these light evenings, back to the neighborhood of the old vestry behind Mr. Gaup's funeral parlor, but she saw nothing unusual. Whatever had been hiding there was either lying low, or else had gone.

On a Thursday evening, however, near the end of April, she was surprised to find an old friend skulking in the bridal wreath beyond the wooden fence. It was Mr. Frightful.

They did not have long to talk. Mr. Frightful said that he was still determined to smoke out the Porglie, wherever it was hiding, and she told him about the noise in the vestry. Then a station wagon came into the driveway and the two men in white uniforms got out and took Mr. Frightful away.

Two nights later he was back again, but this time she didn't even get to see him. Mr. Gaup had discovered him first and made the authorities promise to lock him up more securely hereafter, as this was a law-abiding community, and they did not want a maniac prowling around. The men promised to send Mr. Frightful upstate to an escape-proof institution.

Mindy knew that she would never see him again, and it was a low point in her life. Patino was gone; the neighborhood rather quiet, and a pall over the Gaup's household, she knew, for it was said that the strange old man, Mr. Zee, was quite ill and sinking fast. Mr.

Gaup bought four pounds of Paris green from her father that week.

On Low Sunday, Mr. Zee was quietly Gathered Home.

MR. ZEE'S death certificate, the neighborhood learned without surprise, had been made out by old Doctor Bentry, a tobacco-chewing atavist of whom Mindy's father had once said that he would as soon be guillotined as let old Horse Bentry lay scalpel to *his* tonsils.

Later that same afternoon, Doc Bentry told some of the men in Benson's Bar that it was the damnedest case of dehydration that he had ever seen. The skin of the old man was like parchment, but it was stretched tight, like a shirt that was too small. No apparent dropsy, though. It was a caution, Doc Bentry said, what heart trouble could do to you.

Also, Mr. Zee had worn an enormous ruby ring that had caught the doctor's eye. Bentry had done almost everything, they said, before he'd bought his medical license in Missouri twenty years ago and settled down, and he knew a good stone when he saw one.

He said that he figured to go over and sit up with that ring all night to make sure that it didn't get lost, like Old Man Marsh's gold watch.

So it was that when Mindy's father sent her over to the Gaups', just at bedtime, to take them their evening paper, which had been thrown by mistake on her own lawn, the three of them, Mr. and Mrs. Gaup and Doctor Bentry, were having a wake in the reception room over in the funeral parlor.

Carefully avoiding the old vestry, she went around to the front and knocked on the door.

Doc Bentry opened the door, and she could see that he had been crying, for his nose was very red. She gave him the paper, and looked past him at the dark, dusty drapes that fell from the central table of the bier itself. It was pretty scary.

"Ever see a corpse?" said Doc Bentry, hiccupping slightly.

Wide-eyed, Mindy shook her head.

"Come on," Doc Bentry magnanimously invited, "I'll take you over."

Mr. Gaup opened his mouth as though to protest; then tightly closed it, glaring at Bentry with a helpless fury.

The face of Mr. Zee *was* like parchment, if one can imagine parchment with a green-

ish tinge. But her fascinated eyes roved down to the pale hands, folded across the not-too-clean white shirt, for upon one of the long fingers glittered a red stone of awesome luster in a curious setting that was like a huge beetle in its general shape, and must have, like her father's masonic ring, some talismanic significance.

If anyone left the room for a moment, the ring was likely to fall down among the crepe or something, and get lost.

"Send that child out of here," snapped Mr. Gaup at last.

"Go lay an egg," said Doc Bentry. But to Mindy he said, "You'd better skedaddle, kid. I must be drunker than I thought." And he rubbed his hand over his face.

The atmosphere was not friendly. Doc Bentry suddenly seemed to wear an evil leer on his shapeless face; Mr. Gaup's attentuated visage seemed longer and more sinister than ever before, and his wife's eyes were the coldest that she had ever seen.

And all of them were looking at her—the intruder. Mindy ran.

Outside, the cool breeze felt friendly and familiar against her cheeks as she started across the old churchyard toward her own back gate. But far down by the streetlight, a figure came into her field of vision, walking fast, now and then glancing over its shoulder.

Presently she could make out the features. It was Mr. Frightful.

"THERE YOU are," he said, when he spied her.

"Yes," agreed Mindy, staring as though at a ghost.

"You are surprised to see me?" Mr. Frightful snorted. "Let me tell you that these maximum security institutions are not what they *used* to be."

Mindy was willing to concede that point. "But why do you keep coming back here, when they always look here the very first thing?"

"Because," said Mr. Frightful, with a tone of outraged calmness, "as I have told you until I am sick of it, there is surely a Porglie frequenting this neighborhood. He must be found, and I fancy that we have not much longer. Now, let us go over to the vestry, where we can talk without fear of being interrupted, if talk we must."

"All right," said Mindy reluctantly, "but there's still a lot I don't understand about this thing. *I* haven't got any-

thing against the Porglies."

"An idiot could grasp it. I mentioned ecdysis before, which is a bursting of the old skin or shell. Porglies, degrading nature, combine it with an odd sort of multiple palingenesis, which, I'm sure you will agree, is adding insult to outrage, even if there were nothing more against them."

"Are they like caterpillars?"

"A Porglie does not turn into a butterfly. The phenomenon is more nearly analogous to the transformation of larvae to the pupa stage. Have you ever seen a cocoon burst in the autumn?"

"Ugh!" said Mindy, shuddering.

"You may well exclaim 'ugh'," Mr. Frightful said. He took a funny-looking thing out from under his coat. It resembled a big camera with a long, telescopic lens. But not very much.

"What on earth?" exclaimed Mindy.

"It is a Porglie emulsifier," answered Mr. Frightful shortly. He did not elaborate, for they had reached the vestry.

"If you don't mind my saying it," said Mindy, "I don't think we ought to go in there just now. They're having a wake up in the front. They might hear us."

Mr. Frightful started visibly. "A *wake?*" he said.

"Sure. Mr. Zee, the Gaup's lodger, died, and they're sitting up with his ruby ring."

"The fools!" hissed Mr. Frightful. "It's exactly what he wanted. Even now, we may be too late to save them. Come on!"

"Wh-what's the matter?"

"Don't you understand, Zee is our quarry. He *must* be. It is a typical Porglie name and a typical, vile Porglie set-up."

"You mean Mr. Zee was the Porglie? But he's dead." Mindy felt an immense relief. "I guess I'd better go home now, if you don't need me any more. It's kind of late."

"Not dead," said Mr. Frightful.

"What?"

"Only in the pre-ecdysis period of dormancy, which lasts just a few hours." Rapidly he was making adjustments upon the various switches and triggers of his emulsifier with fingers that seemed ominously deft and practiced.

"He looked dead to me," argued Mindy. "In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he was pretty full of Paris green."

"A mere cocktail to a Porglie." Mr. Frightful pushed

open the door to the vestry. It creaked a little. "Shh!" he said.

Their goal appeared to be a narrow finger of light which emanated from beneath the door in the front of the vestry, for Mr. Frightful stalked it with the cunning of a veteran Porglie hunter, and Mindy, frightened quite out of her wits, tiptoed after.

Mr. Frightful brushed back his dank hair and put his ear to the door. There was not the slightest sound from the funeral parlor. The silence was unnatural.

She watched his hand close upon the doorknob, ever so gently, and inch it open, slowly, slowly, as the entire vestry behind her became flooded with light.

Something over in the corner, disturbed by that light, made a rustling sound. There was a movement of something white between one of the crates and the wall, and a familiar shape waddled out into the beam of light cast through the door.

It was Patino, walking rather proudly, for a convoy of eight yellow ducklings followed after.

BUT MINDY'S glazed eyes had scarcely time to take in this incredible scene of domesticity, for Mr. Frightful's hand had gradually closed upon her wrist with a vise-like grip.

"Listen carefully," Mr. Frightful said. He was standing between her and the door. "You shall be my witness. Take one quick look inside, and then you must leave. Remember that the newborn are not always pleasant to behold."

Mindy remembered the ravenous little caterpillars that had devoured the leaves of the elm in her back yard.

"Now then," said Mr. Frightful. "One look only."

One look was quite enough. Mr. and Mrs. Gaup and Doctor Bentry had quite vanished. Unless you could count a patent leather shoe, a comb, a lock of hair on the floor. There were Porglies all over the place. Dozens and dozens of little Porglies.

Mr. Frightful leveled the emulsifier. It was not going to be very nice.

One of the Porglies burped.

"Quack," said Patino.

Mindy went outside and waited.

THE END

THE 4D BARGAIN

by Evelyn E. Smith

At last they had invented a handbag that would hold everything a lady could possibly want to put into it—and still be small, light, and fashionable. But would everything that went in always come out?

"BUT WHERE does everything go?" Miss Nethercott asked, peering into the lining of the small handbag. "It must be somewhere."

"It goes into another dimension," Mr. Mendenhall explained patiently for the fifth time. "That's why we call it the extradimensional handbag. Catchy name, isn't it?"

"It stinks," said Mr. Villardi, probing the bag's interior with a gingerly forefinger. "I wish you wouldn't keep coming up with these godawful novelty items, Mendenhall."

"Imagine," the handbag buyer went on, undaunted, "now a woman will be able to carry

a small, smart-looking pocketbook, and yet be able to put everything her heart desires inside of it. I guess you boys will be able to go to town on this, hey, Villardi?"

The advertising manager pulled a package of cigarettes, a key ring, a handkerchief, a salesorder book, and a copy of *Standard Rates and Data* out of the eight-inch cube. "Trouble is, nobody'll believe it," he said sourly, "because that's the copy we always use with our small handbags. Public'll put it down to routine hyperbole."

"But I don't understand." Miss Nethercott's large blue eyes appealed to Mr. Mendenhall. "Where were the things? They couldn't fit inside the bag. *It's to small!*"

"It's based on some kind of a scientific principle," Mr. Mendenhall told her. "Invented by a scientist, you know. I don't," he admitted. "entirely understand it myself; I guess I have the executive more than the scientific type mind. The way the fellow who sold them to me put it, seems there are lots and lots of dimensions, and we're using a paltry three."

"It does seem like an awful waste," Miss Nethercott agreed, nodding her golden head. "You mean in this handbag we're just putting one more to use? Like electricity after Benjamin Franklin found out it was there all along?"

"That's the idea exactly!" Mr. Mendenhall beamed. "You're a bright little girl, Miss Nethercott." He patted her head. "Here, I want you to take one of these for your very own self. To inspire you in your work."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Mendenhall! I really do need a new bag! Only, if you're going to be so kind as to give me a pocketbook, I'd rather have a big one because I carry my lunch to business, and—oh, *yes,* Mr. Mendenhall; thank you, Mr. Mendenhall!"

"Lessee," the buyer said thoughtfully, "I think we'd better put this line straight upstairs into the *Boutique*. We don't want all those ground-floor just-looking-arounders smearing them with their greasy paws. It isn't exactly a low-priced item." He chuckled. "Gotta charge for the extra dimension, you know."

"Maybe we're using only three dimensions," the advertising manager suggested, regarding the array of extra-dimensional handbags in the stockroom with distaste, "be-

cause somebody else is using the others."

"Let's not be whimsical, Villardi. How could there be anybody else? We're the only ones here, aren't we? Who else could be using the other dimensions?"

Miss Nethercott clutched her new handbag possessively. "But then where do all the things you put into it *go*?"

Mr. Mendenhall glared at her.

THE FIRST thing Balfig Twersnal noticed, as he slithered through the entry of his modest ground-floor apartment was that Sligny was disturbed. They had been mated for too many cycles for him to fail to catch her moods at once. And, if she was disturbed, he was disturbed.

"What is troubling you, my dearest?" he asked, twining his tendrils about hers.

"Oh, Balfig, I don't know how to tell you...I have a—a Luxury!"

He recoiled. "A Luxury! *Sligny!* Did you steal it?"

She drew herself up to her full sixteen feet. "Of course not, Balfig. How could you think I was capable of—of—?"

"I'm sorry, Sligny," he said humbly. "I know you couldn't possibly have done an Unordained thing like that. But where did you get it?"

"It appeared suddenly in the air. Honestly it did." And she held out a tiny object to Belfig.

He started. "Sligny, it looks like—it looks like *Plastic.*"

She nodded mournfully. "I don't blame you for suspecting I stole it, really. Nobody will believe I didn't. What—what do you think it is?"

He looked at the thing. It was a six-inch rectangular bar with minuscule dentations formed out of one of the long sides. He sighed heavily. "Obviously it is useless." He looked at it again. "It isn't even ornamental."

She turned pale blue. "It's definitely a Luxury then. I was hoping it might sneak into the ornamental class and get by as an aesthetic necessity."

He made a negative sign. "Let's not fool ourselves; it has no purpose. It is clearly a Luxury. Why did it come to us? How did it come to us?" He put up a tendril. "No, Sligny, I believe you—but will enyone else? There is so much we cannot understand." He sighed. "I suppose it is So Ordained." And he made a Sign of Reverence.

"Let's hide it!" she cried impetuously.

"Hide it!" He stared down at her. "And you know what'll happen if it's discovered then? It'll be the garnish mines for both of us, with no chance of reprieve!"

"Let's—" she took a deep breath "—let's destroy it!"

He looked at her in horror. "Destroy *Plastic?* An *Artifact?* An *Ordained Luxury?"*

"I—I'm sorry, Balfig. I didn't know what I was saying."

"I shall go to the House Supervisor," Balfig said firmly, "and declare it. It's the only thing to be done."

HE LEFT the apartment bravely enough, but, once outside, he surrendered to the tremors that shook his body. Only once in his life had he been as high as the two hundredth floor—when he and Sligny had been assigned the apartment on their mating day and the House Supervisor had given them both the customary speech of welcome and warning.

But now it was very different. He held his breath and rose to the Ordained Regions. Sliding past the long line of waiting tenants of all levels, he diffidently approached the secretary, a young female in the garb of the hundred and ninety-ninth floor. "High is High and low is low," he gave the customary greeting.

"Name?" she snapped.

"B-Balfig Twersnal."

She pressed a button and the simulacrum of his personaplate appeared in the plastotop of her desk. "Balfig Twersnal, Apartment 1XA2, vimgritch furler for Harsnoop-Tsalk, second floor?"

"That's right."

Her eyestalks were rigid with horror. *"But you have no appointment!"* All the other tenants turned to stare in disbelief.

"I—I know." He moistened his vocal apparatus. "But this is an emergency."

"I'll contact the First Ordained One right away!" she said, her voice trembling with the enormity of the situation.

The benevolent visage of Kiv Gzandor appeared in the crystal. "Yes, harchli, what is it?"

"There's a young male from the ground floor to see you, harch," she babbled. "Without an appointment! He says it's an emergency."

"Ah, an emergency," the Ordained One said with relish.

"Well, send him right in, harchli. An emergency always takes precedence."

Balfig slithered diffidently into the First Ordained One's office and stood before the desk, in which his personaplate glittered. In the presence of the House Supervisor, he felt as if he were standing before the Ordainer Himself. He tried to keep his eyes off the nine luxuries to which Gzandor's High rank entitled him.

"High is High and low is low, Highness," he quavered.

"Low is low and High is High. Well, Balfig," Gzandor said kindly, "tell me what it is you have done. Did you kill anyone? If it is someone on your own level, I promise you justice will be tempered with mercy. After all, you are young and boys will be boys."

"No, your Altitude," Balfig replied. "I have not killed anyone. I have—" he choked. "I have—quite by accident, you understand—come into possession of a Luxury."

The First Ordained One's eyestalks stood erect. *"A Luxury!* By the Ordainer, Twersnal, this is a serious matter. Give it here." Balfig handed the diminutive object over. "How did you come by it?"

Balfig had already determined that, at all costs, Sligny must be kept out of the affair. "It—it appeared to me in the air, Highness. Down in our apartment," he said. "Just a few minutes ago. I brought it right up to you."

"That is a very thin story, Twersnal," the Supervisor said sternly. "Can't you see for yourself how improbable it sounds?"

"Yes, Altitude, to me it does sound improbable. But then it is Ordained that there is so much that one in my unelevated position cannot understand. I had hoped that to those more Highly Placed it would seem quite possible. For it did happen."

"Mmmm." The Supervisor examined the Artifact. "I do not believe your story, Twersnal, but I will retain an open mind. The Artifact itself is one of the most useless I have ever seen, and, hence, the most Luxurious. Your crime is a serious one, my boy. The only thing in your favor is the fact that this seems to be an absolutely unique type of Plastic. If it is proved to be so, then the uniqueness of your explanation will become less unique, and, hence, its essential improbability will be essentially less improbable."

"Yes, Highness," Balfig said miserably. "Then I do not have to go to the garnish mines yet?"

"You know, Balfig, that under our laws anyone is presumed to be innocent until we have decided he is guilty. So, until your case is adjudicated, simple apartment arrest will be sufficient. You will understand that we cannot afford to have a suspect Luxury lover furling our people's vimgritch."

"No, Altitude," Balfig said miserably. "High is High and low is low."

"And low is low and High is High."

"BUT I know I didn't 'just misplace' my comb!" Miss Nethercott protested. "I put it right into the bag in the stockroom, and when I got to the tenth floor powder room it was gone. There must be a hole or something in the bag."

"It's a brand-new bag and there can't possibly be a hole in it!" Mr. Mendenhall snapped. "During your afternoon rest period, you go down to Notions and get another comb. Tell them to charge it to Handbags."

"Oh, Mr. Mendenhall, you're such a doll!"

"Well, you show your appreciation by getting out there and *selling those bags!*" Mr. Mendenhall gave Miss Nethercott a fatherly pinch on the cheek and rode away majestically on the down escalator.

Since business was never brisk in the *Boutique,* Miss Nethercott amused herself by filling the extradimensional handbags with all the portable objects in the vicinity. By and by, a small crowd of women had gathered to watch her. The department manager watched her too. Demonstrators might be all right for the ground floor, although he personally felt they were out of place anywhere in a store like Prettyman and Smoot, but they were definitely not appropriate for the *Boutique.*

"You see," Miss Nethercott declaimed dramatically, for she had theatrical ambitions and loved an audience, even of females, "you can put just as many things as you want into it, and it'll never bulge or get out of shape or anything."

"My," commented a customer, "how do they ever do that?"

"It's scientific," Miss Nethercott explained. "Like—like detergents. Who knows what they're made of? But they

work."

"Ah," said the woman wisely, "we live in an age of great technological advancement."

"Presto!" Miss Nethercott gleefully descended to a nontechnical level, as she pulled a large suede envelope, a black velvet clutch, a gold evening carryall, and a cowhide briefcase out of the extradimensional bag.

"That's only four," a helpful customer pointed out. "You put in five—I saw you. There was a calfskin pouch, too."

Miss Nethercott felt around inside. "You must be mistaken, madam," she said coldly.

All the other women turned around to inspect the helpful customer from head to foot. She turned red underneath her rather unfortunate hat. "Sorry...perhaps I was," she gulped, and fled.

But the other women stayed and bought. That evening it turned out that a calfskin pouch was, in fact, missing from the eleventh floor handbag counter, but, since Miss Nethercott had sold the unprecedented number of fifty extradimensionals, at $35.95 each, she was not taken to task.

However, when she sat down in the subway—after giving the elderly gentleman who got up for her a ravishing smile in payment—she discovered that the pocket novel she had promoted from a susceptible clerk in Books was gone from the bag. She clicked her tongue in annoyance, and resoled to present the bag to her roommate, whose birthday was in the offing. Of course she had planned to give Gloria a $5.95 rather than a $35.95 present, but really she was very fond of Gloria, and, anyway, it wasn't as if she had paid for the thing.

"BALFIG!" Sligny, emerging from the communication closet. "We're saved! An Artifact materialized in Margroop Slurg's living room too. She just called me up to tell me about it."

He raised a dull eyestalk. "A luxury?"

"Well, no, I suppose not. She says it's a receptacle. It opens up and you put little things in it. At least, it's empty inside, so it must be for that."

"Oh." He lowered his eyestalk. "Then it's a different case entirely."

"Not *entirely*. If a necessity materialized in her apartment and a Luxury materialized in

ours, then surely the Ordained Ones can see that possession of the Luxury is not our fault. Its coming was Ordained."

"And it is ordained that I should go to the garnish mines," Balfig replied miserably.

"That *we* should go, darling." Sligny said, "Wherever you go, I shall go too." They twined tendrils.

The communicator blippeted. Sligny disentangled herself and dashed into the closet. "Oh, darling," she exclaimed as she came out, "everybody on our level seems to be getting Artifacts! Lazni Troob just told me she got a little receptacle—"

"Then it's not a Luxury."

"But, wait a minute, it's full of the most malodorous liquid you ever scented. How could it be useful?"

"Probably a medicine or a zorpak repellent," he said bitterly. "It's just our luck to be the only ones stuck with a Luxury. The fact of spontaneous materialization in itself isn't going to make much differnece to the Ordained Ones; they know all about that sort of thing."

"And Teslot Snikk got a book!"

"A book! What kind of a book? Anyhow, that rates as a necessity too."

"Not if you can't read it, it doesn't. This one is in some kind of secret script, Banmor told me, but Teslot says *he* can read it." She sniffed. "That Teslot thinks he's so smart—says the whole thing is an Ordained Vistation."

"I suppose," Balfig remarked without much interest, "he'll present it to the Ordained Ones for commentary and explanation?"

"No!" All of Sligny's eyes bulged from their stalks with the enormity of what she had to tell. "He says he is going to interpret and expound it *himself*."

"What! But how can he? He is on the lowest level, like us. He can't have opinions of his own."

"He says the book says he can."

Suddenly there was a faint glow in the corner of the room. A clink...and the glow disappeared.

"Just what happened before," Sligny commented, reaching forward to pick up the object before her mate could stop her. It was a tiny, plump cylinder of some base substance like gold."

"Even if it is only metal, it's

still another Luxury," Balfig said dully. "It's no use; we're doomed."

"Wait a minute—it seems to be a receptacle. The top comes off, see. But there's something inside." She peered into the lit-the o r o f i c e despondently. "Something perfectly useless looking too."

She twiddled the thing with a tendril. A tiny red stick suddenly rose out of it. Balfig and Sligny jumped back, clinging to each other.

Sligny recovered h e r s e l f first. "It's perfectly harmless." She picked up the object from the floor. "Look, it makes red marks; it must be useful!"

"But are red marks useful?"

THERE was another little glow and a thunk. This time it was a Plastic Artifact very much like the first one they'd received. Spots of light began to appear all over the room and objects of metal, Plastic, and strange, hard-to-malleable substances showered in one of them. There were queer little squares of cloth, papers of all shapes and sizes —some with secret writing on them, more with evil pictures and an unmistakable dainty tea sandwich.

"Don't eat it, Sligny!" Balfig yelled. "It may be poisonous! Although, maybe it would be better for us to end it all, at that! Sooner death than the garnish mines."

"Balfig!" Sligny said reproachfully. "You musn't talk like that. And, after all, I don't see why we *should* feel badly."

"You *don't?*"

"No." She picked up the Artifacts in her delicate tendrils. "Why should we? Aren't we the richest people in the House? Perhaps even in the City," she quipped. No one on their level could ever be quite sure that the concept of the City was one to be taken literally.

He was not amused. "But, Sligny—"

"Haven't you considered that the Ordained Ones no longer dare touch us? One or two or three Luxuries they could suspect us of stealing, but we have *hundreds*. There aren't that many in the House —probably not even in the Block! No one could possibly find that many to steal. And such unique ones, too. Don't you see, it must be Ordained that we should have them?"

"Frankly, I don't—"

At that moment the entry

urp urpled. Teslot Snikk's visage appeared on the interview screen. "Let me in, Balfig!" he exclaimed, omitting the customary salutation. "I have great news for you!"

Balfig pressed the opener, and Teslot, followed by a majority of the ground-floor tenants, surged in. "Low is low and High is High, harchin," Balfig said in mild surprise, as they filled his apartment. "I don't wish to seem inhospitable," he added, "but have you forgotten that associating with a suspect Luxury lover is enough to make you suspects yourselves?"

"Luxury lover, tcha!" Teslot snapped.

The heresy was enough to make even his cohorts gasp.

"We are all Luxury lovers!" he went on stoutly. "All of us here have Luxuries, and, by the Ordainer, we are going to keep them!"

"See, Balfig!" Sligny exclaimed. "Didn't I always say Teslot was the cleverest man on this floor?"

"...because," Teslot went on, thumping a tiny volume bound in a thin substance decorated with bright, eerie figures, "it is So Ordained."

"High is High and low is low," the crowd intoned reverently.

"No! Low is High and High is low!" Teslot shrieked. "It is so written. For what other reason have all these Luxuries been bestowed only upon those who live on the lower floors. It is because the Ordainer has Chosen Us. He has reversed our whole Doctrine. Those on the High Floors, they shall be low under His Eyestalks, and those on the low shall be High. It is *Ordained!*"

"Low is High and High is low," chanted the crowd accomodatingly.

"To you, Balfig," shouted Teslot, "the first Ordained Revelation was made! To you"—he gestured around the Artifact-filled apartment—" were the most Luxuries given. Therefore, it is clearly indicated that you are to be our new House Supervisor. Come, let us oust the tyrannical Gzandor from his post and let you assume your rightful privileges as First Ordained One."

"But I wouldn't know what to do," Balfig demurred.

"Don't worry," Teslot advised him. "You just do what I tell you to."

"You go with Teslot, dear," Sligny said. "He knows best."

"High is low and low is is High!" screeched the crowd.

"Hooray!"

"LOOK," SAID Mr. Mendenhall, "so we all make mistakes. . . ."

"You want me to call the copywriters off?" Mr. Villardi demanded querulously. "After they already got started? I do wish you'd try out these novelty items before you turn them over to advertising."

"But how was I to know they would—in fact, I still don't *know* they did. If you ask me, it's just those goddamned women's carelessness!"

"Mr. Mendenhall!" Miss Nethercott protested. "Besides, *I* lost my comb and my Mickey Spillane, and *I'm not* careless."

"Most efficient little worker I ever had," the buyer murmured bemusedly. "But where could all that stuff they say they've been losing go? Most peculiar coincidence—that's what it must be. Because, we've checked the bags they brought back—not a hole in them."

"There's that hole into the extra dimension," Mr. Villardi pointed out.

"You know," Miss Nethercott said brightly, "it's funny but I didn't lose anything from my bag until I went upstairs. And most of the ladies who came to return their bags happened to mention the same thing. There's probably a lot of ladies living on first and second floors who haven't had any trouble at all."

"Could we sell it as a low-altitude item maybe?" Mr. Mendall asked himself. "No, that wouldn't be practical. But why, why, *why* should all this have to happen to me?"

"You remember what I said about other people using the other dimensions?" Mr. Villardi suggested. "Well, just suppose for instance they happen to live higher up than we do. No reason they should start at our sea-level—no reason they should be anything like us, really. Anyhow, then our high floors would coincide with their first ones, and so things would start getting over to them only when—"

"Please, Villardi!" the buyer protested. "I got enough of a headache without your contributions."

"But it seems to me like an awfully reasonable explanation," Miss Nethercott insisted. "Of course," she added hastily, catching Mr. Mendenhall's eye, "either way we can't sell any more of the bags,

can we? We would lose good will."

Mr. Mendenhall nodded in sad agreement. "Not only that, but we'e got to take back those we sold already, without any questions. Naturally the customers can't hold us responsible for the stuff that allegedly disappeared. They can *try*, all right, but they haven't a legal leg to stand on! And I guess Prettyman and Smoot will be able to stand the loss. After all, if they want me to keep in hot pursuit of the latest thing, they've got to expect an occasional turkey."

"A $35.95 turkey is one hell of an expensie turkey," Mr. Villardi remarked.

Mr. Mendenhall ignored him. "I guess we'll have to sell out the whole consignment at cost on a no return basis."

"No!" exclaimed Mr. Villardi and Miss Nethercott almost simultaneously.

"You mean...a worthy charity?"

"I mean *destroy them*, Mendenhall," Mr. Villardi said. "It's absolutely the only thing to do. And, as you said, the store can absorb the loss."

Mr. Mendenhall rubbed his chin. "Yes, and it'll be a legitimate tax deduction, too. Guess that *is* what we better do. You're right, Villardi; I admit it freely." He sighed. "After all, what's a lousy ten thousand bucks to Prettyman and Smoot? A drop in the bucket. I guess there's no great harm done. We all made mistakes."

"Live and learn," said Miss Nethercott.

"That's it exactly." Mr. Mendenhall beamed at her.

THE END

THE NIGHT EXPRESS *(Continued)*

lowishwhite star which Duveen thought he recognized; the evening star, sometimes called Lucifer.

Duveen knew, from the example of the gray man, that there was no use trying to throw himself into that void: the coach was a closed universe, and seemingly had its own system of gravity. He had already ceased to hope, a long time before. There was no room in his dry body for disappointment or despair; he could only think, *How did we get so far off our course? And how long will we be a-traveling?*

THE END

THE MURKY GLASS

by H. P. Lovecraft and August Derleth

While men are thinking of the planets, other worlds may be thinking of us. At least the curious phenomena of that old New England house suggested that possibility... An unforgettable new story of unearthly wonder by two masters of the science-fiction terror tale.

I MOVED into my cousin Wilbur's home less than a month after his untimely death, not without misgivings, for its isolation in a pocket of the hills off the Aylesbury Pike was not to my liking. Yet I moved with a sense of fitness that this haven of my favorite cousin should have descended to me. As the old Wharton place, the house had been untenanted for many years. It had fallen into disuse after the grandson of the farmer who had built it had left the soil for the seaside city of Kingston, and my cousin had bought it from the estate of that heir disgruntled with the meager living to be made on that sadly depleted land. It was not a calculated move, for the Akeleys did nothing but by sudden impulse.

Wilbur had been for many years a student of archeology and anthropology. He had been graduated from Miskatonic University in Arkham and, immediately following his graduation, had spent three years in Mongolia, Tibet, and Sinkiang Province, followed by an equal number of years divided among South and Central America, and the southwestern part of the United States. He had come home to reply in person to an offer to join the staff of Miskatonic University, but instead he had bought the old Wharton farm and set about to remodel it, tearing down all but one of

the outbuildings, and imposing upon the central structure an even more curious shape than it had gathered to itself in the course of the twenty decades it had been standing. Indeed, the extent of these alterations was not fully apparent to me until I myself took possesion of the house.

It was then that I learned that Wilbur had retained unaltered only one face of the old house; that he had completely rebuilt the front and one side, and had erected a gable room over the south wing of the ground floor. The house had originally been a low building of but one story, with a large attic which had in its time been hung with all the impedimenta of the rural life in New England. In part, it had been constructed of logs, and some of this construction had been carefully retained by Wilbur. This was testimony to my cousin's respect for the handiwork of our forebears in this country, for the Akeley family had been in America fully two hundred years when Wilbur had decided to foreswear his wanderings and settle in his native milieu. The year, as I recall it, was 1921; he had lived but three years thereafter, so that it was 1924—on April 16—that I took possession of the house in accordance with the terms of his will.

The house was still very much as he left it, an anomaly in the New England landscape, for, though it still bore the marks of its ancestry in its stone foundations and the logs of its substructure, as well as in the square stone chimney which rose from its fireplaces, it had been so much altered as to seem a product of several generations. Though the majority of these alterations had apparently been made to contribute to Wilbur's comfort, there was on change which had baffled me at the time that Wilbur had made it, and for which he never offered any explanation: this was the installation in the south wall of his gable room of a great round window of a most curious clouded glass, of which he said only that it was a work of great antiquity, which he had discovered and acquired in the course of his travels in Asia. He referred to it at one time as "the glass from Leng" and at another as "possibly Hyadean in origin," neither of which enlightened me in the slightest, though, to tell the truth, I was not suf-

ficiently interested in my cousin's vagaries to press inquiries.

I SOON wished, however, that I had done so, for I discovered rapidly, once I had taken up my existence in the building, that my cousin's entire living seemed to resolve not about the central rooms of the house on the ground floor—which one might have expected, since these were appointed for maximum effect and comfort—but about the south gable room, for it was here that he kept his rack of pipes, his favorite books, records, and most confortable pieces of furniture. And it was here that he worked on such manuscripts pertinent to his studies as he had in progress at the time that he was struck down with a coronary ailment while he was at work in the stacks of the Miskatonic University library.

That some adjustment between what had been his regimen and what was mine would have to be made, I knew; and it must be made in my favor. It seemed, therefore, that the first order of business was a restoration of the rightful way of existence in the house, a resumption of life on the ground floor. To tell the truth, I found myself from the beginning curiously repelled by the gable room; in part, certainly, because it reminded me so strongly of the living presence of my dead cousin who would never again occupy his favorite corner of the house, and in part, also, because the room was to me unnaturally alien and cold, holding me off as by some physical force I could not understand, though this was surely consistent with my attitude about the room, for I could understand it no more than I ever really understood my cousin Wilbur.

The alteration I wished to bring about, however, was not as easily accomplished as I had hoped it might be, for I was soon aware that my cousin's old "den" cast an aura over the entire house. There are those who hold that houses inevitably assume something of the character of their owners; if the old house had worn any of the characteristics of the Whartons, who had lived in it for so long, it was certain that my cousin had effectively obliterated them when he remodeled the house, for now it seemed often literally to speak of Wilbur Akeley's presence. It was not often an obtrusive feel-

ing—only rather an uneasy conviction I experienced of being no longer alone, or of being under some scrutiny, the source of which was not known to me.

Perhaps it was the very isolation of the house which was responsible for this fancy, but it came to seem to me that my cousin's favorite room was like something alive, waiting for his return, like an animal unaware that the master for whom it waited would not again come back. Perhaps because of this obsession, I gave the room more attention than in fact it deserved. I had removed from it certain articles, such as a very comfortable l o u n g i n g chair; but I was curiously impelled to bring them back, out of compulsions which arose from different and often conflicting convictions—the fancy that this chair, for instance, which at first proved to be so comfortable, was made for someone of a different shape from my own, and thus was uncomfortable to my person, or the belief that the light was not as good downstairs as above, which was responsible for my returning to the gable room the books I had removed from it.

The fact was, undeniably, that the character of the gable room was subtly at variance with that of the remainder of the house. My cousin's home was in every way prosaic enough, except for that one room in the south gable. The ground floor of the house was filled with creature comforts, but gave little evidence of having been extensively used, save for that room given over to the preparation of food. In contrast, the gable room, while also comfortable, was comfortable in a different way, difficult to explicate; it was as if the room, manifestly a "den" built by one man for his use, had been used by many different kinds of people, each of whom left something of himself within these walls. Yet I knew that my cousin had lived the life of a recluse, save for his journeys to the Miskatonic at Arkham and the Widener Library in Boston. He had gone nowhere else, he had received no callers, and even, on the rare occasions when I stopped at his home—as an accountant I did sometimes find myself in his vicinity—he seemed always willing that I be gone, though he was unfailingly courteous, and though I never remained longer than fifteen minutes at most.

Truth to tell, the aura of the gable room diminished my resolve. The lower floor was ample for my purposes; it afforded me a commodious home, and it was easy to put the gable room and the alterations I hoped to make in it out of my mind, to defer and postpone it until it came to seem too minor a matter to trouble about. Moreover, I was still frequently away from home for days and nights at a time, and there was nothing pressing I needed to do about the house. My cousin's will had been probated, the estate had been settled, and no one challenged my possession of the house.

ALL MIGHT have been well, for, with my resolve put by, I was much less aware of my unfinished plans for the gable room, had it not been for the succession of little incidents which occurred to disturb me. These were of no consequence at first; they began as tiny, almost unnoticed things. I believe that the first of them took place when I had been in possession of the house scarcely a month, and it was such an infinitesimal thing that it did not occur to me to connect it to the later events I experienced until many weeks had gone by.

It happened one night when I sat reading before my fireplace in the ground-floor livingroom, and it was surely nothing more, I was certain, than a cat or some similar animal scratching at the door to be let in. Yet it was so distinct that I got up and made the rounds, from the front door to the back, and even to a little side door which was a relic of the oldest part of the house, but I could find neither cat nor trace of one. The animal had vanished into the darkness. I called to it several times, but it neither replied nor made any other sound. Yet I had no sooner seated myself again before the scratching began anew. No matter how I tried, I failed utterly to catch any sight of the cat, though I was disturbed in this fashion fully half a dozen times, until I was so upset that, had I caught sight of the cat, I would probably have shot it.

Of itself, this was an incident so trivial that no one would think twice about it. Could it not have been a cat familiar with my late cousin, and unfamiliar enough with me to be frightened away by my appearance? Indeed, it could. I

thought no more of it. However, in less than a week, a similar incident took place, differing in one marked exception to the first. This time, instead of there being the clawing or scratching of a cat, there was a slithering, groping sound that sent a chill of apprehension through me, just as if a giant snake or an elephant's trunk were moving along the glass of the windows and doors. The pattern of its sounding and my reactions was exactly similar. I heard, but saw nothing; I listened, but could find nothing—only the intangible of sounds. A cat, a snake? What more?

But there was yet more, quite apart from the occasions on which the cat or the snake seemed to have returned for another try. There was the time when I heard what sounded like hoof beats, or the tramping of some gigantic animal, or the twittering of birds pecking at the windows, or the slithering of some vast body, or the sucking sounds of lips or suckers. What was I to make of all this? I considered hallucination, and dismissed it as an explanation, for the sounds occurred in all kinds of weather and at all hours of the night and day, so that, had there actually been an animal of any size at door or window, I should certainly have caught sight of it before it vanished into the wooded hills which rose on all sides of the house, for the fields had long since been reclaimed by new growths of poplar, birch, and ash trees.

This mysterious cycle might never have been interrupted if I had not chanced one evening to open the stair door leading up to the gable room, on account of the heat of the ground floor; for it was then, when the clawing of a cat came once more, that I realized the sound came not from one of the doors, but from the window in the gable room. I bounded up the stairs in unthinking haste, never stopping to realize that it would have been a remarkable cat, indeed, which could or would climb to the second floor of the house and demand entrance through the round window, which was the only opening into the room from outside. And, since the window did not open, either in whole or in part, and, since it was clouded glass, I saw nothing, even though I stood there and continued to hear, just as close by as the other side of the

glass, the sounds made by the cat clawing the glass.

I raced downstairs, snatched up a powerful flashlight, and went out into the hot summer night to throw a beam of light to the side wall in which the window stood. But all sound had ceased, and there was nothing whatsoever to be seen but the bland house wall and the equally bland window, which looked as black from the outside as it looked clouded white from within. I might have remained forever baffled —and often I think it would surely have been for the best had it been so—but it was not meant to be.

It was at about this time that I received from an elderly aunt a prized cat named Little Sam, which had been a pet of mine as a kitten two years before. My aunt had fretted about my insistence on living alone, and had finally sent along one of her cats to keep me company. Little Sam now belied his name; he ought to have been called "Big Sam," for he had added pounds since I last saw him, and he was in every way a fierce, tawny feline, a credit to his species.

But, while Little Sam rubbed me with affection, he was of two minds about the house. There were times when he slept in comfort and ease on the hearth; there were others when he was like a cat possessed, demanding to be out. And, at such times as the curious sounds as of some other animal seeking entry were to be heard, Little Sam was virtually mad with fear and fury, and I had to let him out of the house at once, whereat he would streak to the one outbuilding left after my cousin's remodeling was done, and there he would spend the night—there or in the woods, and not come out again until dawn, when hunger drove him back to the house. And into the gable room he absolutely refused to set foot!

IT WAS the cat, in fact, which was responsible for my decision to probe a little deeper into my cousin's work, since Little Sam's antics were so manifestly genuine that I had no recourse but to seek among the scattered papers my cousin had left, some explanation for the phenomena so common to the house. Almost at once I came upon an unfinished letter in the drawer of a desk in one of the downstairs

rooms; it was addressed to me, and it was apparent that Wilbur must have been aware of his coronary condition, for I saw at a glance that the letter was meant to be one of those instructions in case of death. But Wilbur was clearly not cognizant of how short his time was to be, for the letter had been begun only about a month before his death, and, once pushed into the drawer, had not been taken up again, though ample time had been afforded him in which to finish it.

Dear Fred, he wrote, *The best medical authorities tell me I have not long to live, and, since I have already set down in my will that you are to be my heir, I want to supplement that document now with a few final instructions, which I adjure you not to dismiss and want you to carry out faithfully. There are specifically three things you must do without fail, and these are as follows:*

One: All my papers in Drawers A, B, and C of my filing cabinet are to be destroyed.

Two: All books on shelves H, I, J, and K are to be turned over to the library of Miskatonic University at Arkham.

Three: The round glass window in the gable room upstairs is to be broken. It is not to be simply removed and disposed of elsewhere, but it must be shattered.

You must accept my decision that these things must be done, or you may ultimately be responsible for loosing a terrible scourge upon the world. I shall say no more of this, for there are other matters of which I wish to write here while I am still able to do so. One of these is the question.

But here my cousin had been interrupted and left his letter.

What was I to make of these curious instructions? I could understand that his books ought to go to the Miskatonic Library, since I had no especial interest in them. But why destroy his papers? Should they not also go there? And as for the glass—its destruction was surely a piece of wanton folly, since it would entail a new window and thus additional expense. This fragment of a letter had the unfortunate effect of whetting my curiosity even farther, and I determined to look into his things with more attention.

That very evening I began with the books on the designated shelves, which were all in

the south gable room upstairs. My cousin's interest in archeological and anthropological subjects was clearly reflected in his choice of books, for he possessed many texts related to the civilizations of the Polynesians, the Easter Islanders, the Mongolians, and various primitive peoples, as well as books about the migrations of peoples and the cult and myth patterns of primitive religions. These, however, were but a prelude to his shelves of books designated for disposal to the university library, for some of these appeared to be fabulously old, so old, in fact, that they bore no dates, and must have descended, to judge from their appearance and their written characters, from medieval times. The more recent ones among them —and none of these dated beyond 1850—had been assembled from various places; some had belonged to our fathers' cousin, Henry Akeley, of Vermont, who had sent them down to Wilbur; some bore the ownership stamps of the Bibliotheque Nationale of Paris, suggesting that Wilbur had not been above abstracting them from the shelves.

These books were in various languages; they bore titles such as the *Pnakotic Manuscripts,* the *R'lyeh Text,* the *Unaussprechlichen Kulten of* von Junzt, the *Book of Eibon,* the *.Celano Fragments,* the *Cultes des Goules* of the Comte d'Erlette, the *Book of Dzyan* a photostatic copy of the *Necronomicon,* by an Arabian, Abdul Alhazred, and many others, some of them apparently in manuscript form. I confess that these books baffled me, for they were filled—such of them as I could read—with an incredible lore of myths and legends, related beyond question to the ancient, primitive religious beliefs of the race—and, if I could read it correctly, of other and alien races as well.

Of course, I could not hope to do justice to the Latin, French, and German texts; it was difficult enough to read the old English of some of the manuscripts and books. In any case, I soon lost patience with this task, for the books postulated a belief so bizarre that only an anthropologist would be likely to give enough credence to it to amass so much literature on the subject.

YET IT was not uninteresting, though it represented

a familiar pattern. It was the old credo of the force of light against the force of darkness, or at least, so I took it to be. Did it matter whether you called it God and the Devil, or the Elder Gods and the Ancient Ones, Good and Evil or such names as the Nodens, Lord of the Great Abyss, the only named Elder God, or these of the Great Old Ones—the idiot god, Azathoth, that amorphous blight of nethermost confusion which blasphemes and bubbles at the center of all infinity; Yog-Sothoth, the all-in-one and one-in-all, subject to neither the laws of time nor of of space, co-existent with all time and co-terminous with space; Nyarlathotep, the messenger of the Ancient Ones; Great Cthulhu, waiting to rise again from hidden R'lyeh in the depths of the sea; the unspeakable Hastur, Lord of the Interstellar Spaces; Shub-Niggurath, the black goat of the woods with a thousand young?

And, just as the races of men who worshipped various known gods bore sectarian names, so did the followers ot the Ancient Ones, and they included the Abominable Snow Men of the Himalayas and other Asian mountain regions; the Deep Ones, who lurked in the ocean depths to serve Great Cthulhu, though ruled by Dagon; the Shanteks; the Tcho-Tcho people; and many others, some of whom were said to stem from the places to which the Ancient Ones had been banished—as was Lucifer from Eden—when once they revolted against the Elder Gods—such places as the distant stars of the Hyades, Unknown Kadath, the Plateau of Leng, the sunken city of R'lyeh.

Throughout all this, there were two disturbing notes which suggested that my cousin took this myth-pattern more seriously than I had thought. The repeated reference to the Hyades, for instance, reminded me that Wilbut had spoken of the glass in the gable window as "possibly Hyadean in origin." Even more specifically, he had referred to it as "the glass from Leng". It is true that these references might have been coincidental, and for a while I took comfort in telling myself that "Leng" might well be some Chinese dealer in antiques, and the word "Hyadean" might readily have been misunderstood. Yet this was a mere pretense

on my part, for there was indeed everything to show that Wilbur had had more than a passing interest in this utterly alien myths. If his possession of the books and manuscripts themselves were not enough, his notes left me in no doubt whatsoever.

For there were in his notes far more than strange references, which I found oddly disturbing; there were crude, yet effective drawings of shockingly *outre* settings and alien creatures, such beings as I could never, in my wildest dreams, have conceived. Indeed, for the most part, the creatures beggared description; they were winged, bat-like beings of the size of a man; they were vast, amorphous bodies, hung with tentacles, looking at first glance octopoid, but very definitely far more intelligent than an octopus; they were clawed, half-man, half-bird creatures; they were horrible, batrachian-faced things walking erect, with scaled arms and a hue of pale green, like seawater.

There were also more recognizable human beings, however d i s t o r t e d—s t u n t e d and dwarfed Orientals living in a cold place, to judge by their attire, and a race born of miscegenation, with certain characteristics of the batrachian beings, yet unmistakably human. I had never dreamed that my cousin was possessed of such imagination; I had long known that uncle Henry was convinced of the most patently imagined delusions, but to my knowledge no taint had ever shown in Wilbur. I saw now, however, that he had skillfully concealed from all of us the essentials of his true nature. and I was more than a little astonised at this revelation.

For certainly no living creatures could ever have served as models for his drawings, and there were no such illustrations in the manuscripts and books which he had left behind. Moved by my curiosity, I delved deeper and deeper into his notes, and finally put aside certain cryptic r e f e r e n c e s which seemed, however remotely, to bare upon my immediate quest, arranging them into a sequence, which was easy, for all were dated.

OCTOBER 15, '21. Landscape coming clearer. Leng? Suggestive of southwestern America. Caves filled with hordes of bats which begin to

come out—like a dense cloud—just before sundown, blot out the sun. Low shrub growth, twisted trees. A place of much wind. Snow-capped mountains in distance, right, along the rim of the desert region.

OCTOBER 21, '21. Four Shantaks mid-scene. Average height exceeding that of a man. Furred, bat-like bodies, bat wings, extending three feet above head. Face beaked, vulture-like, but otherwise resembling bat. Crossed landscape in flight, pausing to rest on crag in middle distance. Not *aware*. Did one have a rider? Cannot be sure.

NOVEMBER 7, '21. Night. Ocean. A reef-like island in the foreground. Deep Ones together with humans of partly similar origin: hybrid white. Deep Ones scaled, walk with frog-like gait, a cross between a hop and a step, somewhat hunched, too, as most batrachia. Others seem to have swum to reef. Possibly Innsmouth? No coast line evident, no town lights. Also no ship. Rise from below, beside reef. *Devil Reef?* Even hybrids ought not to be able to swim too far without some resting-place. Possibly coast foreground, out of sight.

NOVEMBER 17, '21. Utterly alien landscape. Not of Earth so far as I know. Black heaven, some stars. Crags of porphyry or some similar substance. Foreground a deep lake. Hali? In five minutes the water began to ripple where something rose. Facing inward. A titanic aquatic being, tentacled. Octopoid, but far, far larger—ten—t w e n t y times larger than the giant *Octopus apollyon* of the west coast. What was its neck was alone easily fifteen rods in diameter. Could not risk chance of seeing its face and destroyed the star.

JANUARY 4, '22. An interval of nothingness. *O u t e r space?* Planetary approach, as if I were seeing through the eyes of some being coming in to an object in space. Sky dark, far stars, but the surface of the planet soon looming close. Coming closer, saw barren landscape. No vegetation, as on the dark star. A circle of worshipers facing a stone tower. Their cries: *Shub-Nigguratth!*

JANUARY 16, '22. Undersea region. *Atlantis?* Doubtful. A vast, cavernous, temple-like structure, broken by depth-charges. Massive stones, similar to pyramid stones. Steps

leading down to black maw below. Deep Ones in background. Movement in darkness of stairwell. A huge tentacle moving up. Far back two liquid eyes, many rods apart. *R'lyeh?* Fearful at approach of thing from below, and destroyed star.

FEBRUARY 24, '22. Familiar landscape. *Wilbraham country?* Run-down farm houses, ingrown family. Foreground, old man listening. Time: evening. Whippoorwills calling in great volume. Woman approaches holding stone replica of star in hand. Old man flees. Curious. Must look up.

MARCH 21, '22. Unnerving experience today. Must be more careful. Constructed star and spoke the words: *Ph'nglui mglw'nafh C t h u l h u R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn.* Opened immediately on huge shantak in foreground. S h a n t a k *aware,* and at once moved forward. I could actually hear its claws. Managed to break the star in time.

APRIL 7, '22. I know now they will actually come through if I am not careful. Today the Tibetan landscape, and the Abominable Snowmen. Another attempt made. But what of their masters? If the servants make the attempt to transcend time and space, what of Great Cthulhu — H a s t u r — Shub-Niggurath? I intend to abstain for a while. Shock profound."

NOR DID he again turn to whatever had been his odd pursuit until early the next year. Or, at least, so his notes indicate. An abstention from his obsessive preoccupation, followed once more with a period of brief indulgence. His first entry was just short of a year later.

FEBRUARY 7, '23. There seems now no doubt but that there is a general awareness of the door. Very risky to look in at all. Safe only when landscape is clear. And, since one never knows upon what scene the eye will turn, the risk is all the more grave. Yet I hesitate to seal the opening. I constructed the star as usual, spoke the words, and waited. For a while I saw only the familiar southwestern American landscape, at the hour of evening—bats, owls, night-prowling kangaroo rats and wildcats. Then out of one of the caves, came a Sand-Dweller—rough-skinned, large-eyed, large-eared, with a horrible, distorted resemblance to

the koala bear facially, though his body had an appearance of emaciation. He shambled toward the foreground, manifestly eager. Is it possible that the door makes this side as visible to them as they are to me? When I saw that he was heading straight for me, I destroyed the star. All vanished, as usual. But later—the house *filled with bats!* Twenty-seven of them! I am no believer in mere coincidence!

There occurred now another hiatus, during which my cousin wrote cryptic notes without reference to his visions or to the mysterious "star" of which he had written so often. I could not doubt that he was the victim of hallucinations inspired, no doubt, by his intensive study of the material in the books he had assembled from all corners of the world. These paragraphs were in the nature of substantiation, though they were in essence an attempt to rationalize what he had "seen."

They were interspersed with newspaper clippings, which my cousin obviously sought to relate to the myth-pattern to which he was given—accounts of strange happenings, unknown objects in the heavens, mysterious disappearances into space, curious revelations regarding hidden cults, and the like. It was painfully patent that Wilbur had come to believe intensely in certain facets of the ancient primitive credos, particularly that there were contemporary survivals of the hellish Ancient Ones and their worshippers and followers; and it was this, more than anything else, that he was trying to prove.

It was as if he had taken the writings printed or written in the old books he possessed and, accepting them for literal truth, were trying to adduce the weight of evidence from his own time to add to that from the past. It was true, there was a disturbing element of similarity between the ancient accounts and many of those my cousin had managed to find, but these were doubtless capable of being explained as coincidence. Cogent as they were, I reproduced none of them before sending them to Miskatonic Library for the Akeley Collection, but I remember them vividly—and all the more so in the light of that unforgettable climax to my somewhat aimless inquiry into my cousin Wilbur's preoccupation.

I WOULD never have known about the "star" if it had not been accidentally brought to my attention. My cousin had written repeatedly about "making," "breaking," "constructing" and "destroying" the star as a necessary adjunct to his illusions, but this reference was utterly meaningless to me and would perhaps have remained so had I not chanced to see in the slanting light across the floor of the gable room the faint marks which seemed to outline a five-pointed star. This had been invisible before, because it had been covered by a large rug; but the rug had moved around in the course of my packing the books and papers to be taken to Miskatonic Library, and thus my sight of the markings was an accident.

Even then it did not dawn upon me that these markings represented a star. Not until I finished my work with the books and papers and could push back the rug from the entire center of the floor, did the whole design present itself. I saw then that it was a star of five points, decorated with various ornamental designs, the whole of sufficient size to permit its being drawn from within it. This then, I knew at once, was the explanation for a box of chalk for which I had previously found no reason for being in my cousin's favorite room. Pushing books, papers, and all else out of the way, I went for the chalk, and set about faithfully copying the star design and all the decorations within the star. It was clearly meant for some kind of cabalistic drawing, and it was equally evident that the performer was required to sit within its outlines.

So, having completed the drawing in accordance with the impression left by frequent reconstructions, I sat within the design. Quite possibly I expected something to h a p p e n, though I was still puzzled by my cousin's references in his notes as to the breaking of the design each time he thought himself menaced, for, as I recalled cabalistic rituals, it was the breaking of such designs which brought about the danger of psychic invasion. However, nothing whatsoever took place, and it was not until several minutes had passed that I remembered the words. I had copied them, and now I rose to find my copy, and, finding it, returned with it to the star and gravely spoke the words:

"Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn."

Instantly a most extraordinary phenomenon took place. I was seated, facing the round window of clouded glass in the south wall, so that I saw everything that happened. The cloudiness vanished from the glass, and I found myself, to my astonishment, looking upon a sunbaked landscape—though the hour was night, a few minutes past nine o'clock of a late summer evening in the state of Massachusetts. Yet the landscape which appeared through the glass was one which could not have been found anywhere in New England—an arid country, a land of sandy rocks, of desert vegetation—which was spare—of caverns, and, in the background, of snowcapped mountains; just such a landscape as had been described more than once in my cousin's cryptic notes.

I gazed upon this landscape in the utmost fascination, my mind in turmoil. Life seemed to be going on in the landscape to which I looked, and I picked out one aspect after another: the rattlesnake crawling sinuously along, the sharp-eyed hawk soaring overhead—which enable me to see that the hour was not long before sundown, for the reflection of the sunlight on the hawk's breast was indicative—the Gila monster, the roadrunner—all these prosaic aspects of the American southwest I saw. Where was the scene, then? Arizona? New Mexico?

But the events of that alien landscape kept on without reference to me. The snake and Gila monster crawled away, the hawk plummeted downward and came up with a snake in his talons, the roadrunner was joined by another. And the sunlight drew away, making of that land a face of great beauty. Then, from the mouth of one of the largest caverns came the bats. They came flowing from that black maw by the thousands in an endless stream, and it seemed to me that I could hear their chittering. How long it took for them to fly out into the gathering twilight, I do not know. They had hardly gone before something more made its appearance—a kind of human being, rough of skin, as if the desert's sand had been encrusted upon the surface of its body, with abnormally large eyes and ears. He seemed to be emaciated, with ribs showing through his skin,

but what was particularly repellent was the look of his face—for he resembled an Australian toy bear called the koala. And, at this, I remembered what my cousin had called these people—for there were others following that first, some of them female. Sand-Dwellers!

THEY CAME from the cavern, blinking their great eyes, but soon they came in greater haste, and scattered to both sides, crouching behind the bushes. Then, little by little, an incredible monster made its appearance—at first a probing tentacle, then another, and presently half a dozen cautiously exploring the cave's mouth. And then, from out of the darkness of the cavern's well, an eldritch head showed dimly. Then, as it thrust forth, I almost screamed aloud in horror—for the face was a ghastly travesty on everything civilized; it rose from a neckless body which was a mass of jelly-like flesh, rubbery to the eye, and the tentacles which adorned it took rise from that area of the creature's body which was either its lower jaw or what passed for a neck.

Moreover, the thing had intelligence and perception, for from the first it seemed to be aware of me. It came sprawling out of the cavern, its eyes fixed upon me, and then began to move with unbelievable rapidity toward the window over that rapidly darkening landscape. I suppose I had no real concept of the danger in which I sat, for I watched with rapt attention, and only when the thing was blotting out all the landscape, when its tentacles were reaching toward the gable window—and *through* it!—that I recognized the paralysis of fright.

Through it! Was this then, the ultimate illusion?

I remember breaking through the icy fear which held me long enough to pull off a shoe and hurl it with all my might at the glass; and at the same time, recalling my cousin's frequent references to breaking the star, I slouched forward and wiped part of the design into oblivion. Even as I heard the sound of shattering glass, I slipped into merciful darkness.

I know now what my cousin knew.

If only I had not waited quite so long, I might have been spared that knowledge; I

might have continued able to believe in illusion, in hallucination. But I know that the clouded glass of the gable window was a potent door into other dimensions—to a l i e n space and time; an opening to landscapes Wilbur A k e l e y sought at will, a key to those hidden places of the earth and the star spaces where the followers of the Ancient Ones—and the Old Ones themselves! —lurk forever, awaiting their time to rise again. The glass from Leng—which might have come out of the Hyades, for I never learned where my cousin had got it—was capable of being rotated within its frame; it was not subject to mundane laws save only that its direction was altered by the Earth's movement on its axis. And if I had not shattered it, I would have loosed upon the earth a scourge from other dimensions, unwittingly called forth by my ignorance and curiosity.

For I know now that the models from which my cousin drew his illustrations, however crude, were *alive,* and not the product of his imagination. The final, crowning proof is indisputable. The bats I found in the house when I regained consciousness might have come in through the broken window. That the clouded glass had cleared might have been an optical illusion—if it were not that I know better.

For I know beyond doubt that what I saw was not the product of my feverish fancy, because nothing could demolish that final damning proof which I found near the shattered glass on the floor of the gable room—*the cut tentacle, ten feet in length, which had been caught b e t w e e n dimensions when the door had been shut against that monstrous body to which it belonged, the tentacle no living savant could identify as belonging to any known creature, living or dead, on the face or in the subterranean depths of the earth!*

THE END

MALE REFUGE

by Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

The war of the sexes is one struggle that no amount of disarmament, treaties, or scientific advancement will ever solve. Witness the case of the unexpected visitor in Harry Jenning's garage!

HARRY JENNINGS twisted miserably on the sofa, and fumbled for the light blanket that persisted in sliding off onto the floor. He hunched his shoulders to escape the upholstery button that gouged him so tenaciously, and then swore softly as the sofa sections began to slide apart under the weight of his heavy haunches. Sadly he pushed himself erect, and stared at the elongated shadows cast by the small night light.

He thought wryly about Christine, shapely, satin-skinned and devilish, snoozing comfortably in her downy double bed upstairs. She'd know, of course, that *he* wouldn't try to break down the door, even if she had only barricaded it with a light dressing table. A wealthy man, he reminded himself, should never allow a woman to marry him for his money —unless he has some talent for remaining wealthy. Harry Jennings did not.

He gathered up his blanket and gave the sofa a disgusted kick before he stretched out on the floor. As he struggled uncomfortably with the blanket, for the first time he became aware of a faint humming noise.

He lay quietly and listened as the noise grew louder. It changed from a hum to a wildly pulsating wail that filled the room and rattled dishes in the china cabinet, and still it grew louder. Jennings got to his feet and hesitantly advanced to a front window. The sweep of lawn seemed lazily serene in the soft moonlight. The country road beyond was deserted.

Violent scraping noises

sounded above him as Christine frantically unbarricaded her door. "Harry!" she shouted. "Harry Jennings! What are you doing?"

"Nothing!" he shouted back.

"Don't you nothing me. You leave that TV set alone!"

Jennings cast a rueful glance at the TV set, which he had been threatening to fix himself ever since their repairman had rudely informed them that their credit was no longer good. The noise became an ear-splitting howl, and then cut off abruptly.

"That's better," Christine announced. Her door slammed, and he heard the scraping noises as she reconstructed her barricade. He walked into the dining room and stared out of one window after another. Trees rustled gently in the spring breeze. The moonlight blurred the scragly contours of his unkept garden. In the distance, a Diesel locomotive uttered a long, disdainful snort.

He continued his circuit of the house, shuddering as his bare feet padded across the cold linoleum of the kitchen floor. From a kitchen window he gazed out affectionately on his not—yet—repossessed Cadillac. Then he stared, and backed nervously away.

The Cadillac, which had been comfortably tucked away in the garage when he went to bed, was now parked in the driveway. Not exactly parked, either—it was *placed* there, crossways, and the garage doors were closed.

JENNINGS hurried back through the living room, and tiptoed up the stairs.

"Christine!" he hissed.

She bellowed angerly. "Go soak your head!"

"Didn't you leave the car in the garage when you came home?" he called guardedly.

"Of course I left it in the garage," she shouted. "What'd you want me to do with it—put it in the hall closet?"

He turned his back on the torrent of abuse she flung at him, and tiptoed down the stairs. He had reached the bottom and taken two steps along the hallway when he realized that someone was standing in the living room.

Someone—or was it some*thing?* The shadow swayed grotesquely, and vanished from sight as heavy footsteps advanced on Jennings. A figure came into view, enormous in the uncertain light, the head blocked out by the living room arch. Another giant stride, and

the head bent down to pass through into the hall. Petrified, Jennings stared up at a seven foot man who was studying him gravely. Jennings studied him in turn, his fright mingling with astonishment.

In the darkened hallway the stranger's pale face and hands were faintly luminous. Dark blue veins traced oddly visible patterns across his skin. The face was handsome, with dignified, statuesque features, and the fine blond hair seemed almost artificial in its precisely undulating waves.

The stranger cleared his throat and said, in a matter-of-fact way, "Oh hell."

Haughtily Jennings drew himself up to make the most of his five feet seven inches. Even if he was broke, he didn't have to tolerate strangers who swore at him in the sacred confines of his own house. "Go to hell yourself," he snarled.

The stranger frowned, and said again, hesitantly, "Oh... hell..." His face brightened, and he corrected himself. "Hell-o."

"Who are you?" Jennings demanded.

"Who ... are ... you?" the stranger repeated thoughtfully. "Who..." He smiled, and his head bobbed forward in a slight bow. "Garn. Who...are ...you?"

"Jennings."

"Jen-inks," the stranger repeated. His head bobbed forward again. They stood facing each other, the stranger smiling and Jennings looking curiously at the glimmering fabric of the close-fitting robe that reached to his knees. His legs were bare, and on his feet were plain-looking sandals.

"Well," Jennings said, "come in and sit down." He walked hurriedly back into the living room, hoping to arm himself with the revolver he kept in a desk drawer. But the stranger followed him closely, so he gestured towards the sofa and flipped on the light.

He spun around quickly as he heard the stranger's gasp of pain. Caught in the act of lowering himself cautiously onto the sofa, he stood in a half crouch, hands over his eyes, and spoke rapidly in a language Jennings did not understand. But there was no mistaking the urgent, pleading note in his voice. Jennings turned off the light, and as the stranger recovered and settled himself on the sofa, Jennings noted that he even blinked uncomfortably at the dim night light.

"Excuse me a moment," Jennings said.

He walked into the kitchen, and armed himself with a flashlight. Back in the living room, he confidently dropped into an easy chair. "What can I do for you—Garn, was it?"

"Zo," he said. "Garn."

"What can I do for you?"

Garn hesitated. "Stay," he said finally, his gesture unmistakably taking in the house.

"You want to stay here?"

"Zo—yes."

Jennings looked at him suspiciously. "Where do you come from?"

Garn pondered the question. "Mars?" Jennings suggested.

Garn's dignified face was suddenly contorted by a most undignified spasm of laughter. Jennings waited stubbornly until he had his visitor's attention again. "Venus?" he said.

"Come..." Garn began. He looked about the room, and pointed. Jennings looked searchingly in the indicated direction, and saw only his desk. Puzzled, he turned back to Garn, and found the giant intensely serious and still pointing. "Come..." he said again.

Jennings got to his feet—one hand carefully grasping the flashlight—and walked towards his desk. Understanding came like a clap of thunder. Garn was pointing at a calendar.

JENNINGS awoke early the next morning on the living room floor, and lay for a moment flexing his cramped muscles before he tried to rub the circulation back into one arm. His ear caught an angry buzzing noise emanating from the basement. If Garn was merely an hallucination, he was an extraordinarily material one, and busily at work. Jennings walked into the kitchen and jammed some bread into the toaster.

In the driveway, The Cadillac reposed with headlights pointed in the proper direction. Garn had been humbly apologetic about the misalignment, and promised to correct it. How he had done that, Jennings had no idea.

Jennings battled his hunger pangs by munching on a piece of dry toast while he rummaged through refrigerator and pantry. His search brought to light a single egg and an empty coffee can. He returned to the living room to hastily pull on his clothes, and then he strode resolutely towards the basement door.

"The time has come," he muttered, "to talk of many things, but mainly of money."

He expected to find the basement transformed, but there was no change except for the illumination. Garn had sealed off the windows with a dark substance, and he had thoughtfully applied the same substance to the light bulbs. At the foot of the stairway a softly glowing tube diffused the entire basement in a weird illumination—light that was not light, darkness where all was visible. Jennings went back to the top of the stairway and flipped the light switch. Garn's blackout worked perfectly.

Halfway along the basement wall, Jennings found a metal door of a dull red substance. In the center of the door was a button, which he pressed firmly.

A moment later the door opened and Garn stood beaming at him as he briskly brushed a powdery grey dust from his hands. Jennings caught sight of a half dozen steps leading downward, and another door, before Garn stepped into the basement and carefully closed the door.

"Oh hell," Garn said warmly.

"Hello," Jennings said. "I have a problem."

"Pro-blem?"

"In our agreement of last night there was mention of a—a reward. I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't urgent, but we can't eat without money."

"Mo-ney?" Garn mused. He looked inquiringly at Jennings. "See mo-ney?"

Jennings found a few coins in his pocket, and handed a half dollar to Garn. "Got anything like that?" he said.

Garn inspected it carefully. "Do I," he said.

"Do you what?"

Garn reconsidered. "Make I," he said. He glanced about the basement, pounced upon a paper bag, and disappeared through his door. Jennings paced about impatiently. Ten minutes later Garn was back.

"Kilo," he said proudly, handing the bag to Jennings.

Startled by the weight, Jennings dropped it. The bag broke, and coins rolled recklessly about the basement floor. In ten minutes, Garn had manufactured a kilogram of half dollars.

"Hey, you can't do that!" Jennings exclaimed. "That's counterfeiting!" He studied a coin, found the mysterious light frustrating, and took it up to the kitchen for detailed examination. It looked genuine: a bona fide 1944 half dollar, reasonably clean and bright, but

showing the normal wear and tear imparted by rubbing pockets and clutching fingers. Baffled, Jennings returned to the basement.

"I don't think we can get away with this," he told Garn. "It looks all right, but there's bound to be a catch somewhere."

A frown clouded Garn's handsome features. Clearly he did not understand the difficulty. "Do I," he said again, and hurried away. Jennings found another bag, and started to pick up the scattered coins.

In ten minutes Garn returned, carrying a tray. "Kilo," he said. Heaped on the tray was another kilogram of half dollars.

JENNINGS drove to town, parked, and walked apprehensively towards the bank. He did not relish the thought of a prison term for counterfeiting. On the other hand, a man with assets totaling eighty-seven cents and unlimited liabilities could obviously not afford to be particular. He stoically awaited his turn at the teller's window, and counted out twenty of Garn's half dollars.

"Two fives, please," he said.

The teller recounted deftly, and handed him the two bills.

Emboldened by that success, he filled the car with nine of Garn's half dollars' worth of gasoline, and made a foray on a super market, where thirty-seven of Garn's half dollars gave him title to a staggering load of groceries.

Back home, he set about taking care of his gnawing appetite. The tempting aroma of ham and eggs aroused Christine, and she swept into the kitchen, blonde, shapely and beautiful. Her carelessly draped silk dressing gown called forth painful recollections of more affluent days.

"Food!" she yelped. "Last night you told me you were flat broke."

"I was, last night," Jennings said calmly.

She speared a slice of ham. "What'd you do—rob the bank?"

"In a way," Jennings admitted. "Now sit down. I want to talk to you."

"Nothing doing," she said, emptying the frying pan of ham. "From now on, I barricade my door."

"Sit down!" he snapped. Startled, she slid into a chair.

"Now look. We have a roomer. He moved in last night."

She tossed her head disdainfully. "That's a pretty state of

affairs. Harry Jennings taking in roomers. And where do we put him? This is a small house, and I'm not going to give up the bedroom."

"Believe me, he's no ordinary roomer," Jennings said. "He's going to live in the basement, and I want you to leave him strictly alone."

"He's entirely welcome to the basement," she said. "Who is he?"

"His name is Garn."

Christine took a large bite of ham, and sputtered, "Where is he from?"

Jennings winced. That question had to come up sooner or later, of course, but he would have preferred to deal with it later. He decided it would be best to tell her the truth. "As near as I can figure it out," he said, "he comes from about the year 6000 A.D. He arrived last night by time machine. That was the noise you heard. He has his time machine in the garage."

Christine sniffed. "One of you is a fugitive from the insane asylum."

"It's the truth."

"All right. He's from 6000 A.D., and I'm Cleopatra's mother-in-law, and he can mold down in the basement as long as he likes—providing there's food on the table."

"He's not to be disturbed," Jennings said. "And neither is the garage. He's come to this century to live in peace and quiet."

"I won't go near the man," she said sweetly. "Fry me two eggs, sunny-side-up."

Jennings kept his misgivings to himself, and reached for the eggs. But he knew from bitter experience that asking Christine to stay away from a man was like lecturing a moth about a candle.

Buzzing and clicking noises continued to emerge from the basement until late afternoon. Jennings astutely left his new roomer undisturbed, and heard nothing more from Garn until midnight. Then, from his cramped position on the living room rug, he noted that the man from the future made a number of trips from the basement to the garage. Garn was moving in to stay.

THE FOLLOWING morning Jennings drove in to town, and for his five-dollar bills he acquired a creditable collection of silver dollars, half dollars, quarters, dimes and nickles of assorted years and mintages. He would have liked to start Garn

manufacturing five-dollar bills, but the matter of serial numbers troubled him. As a man in a position to amass a fortune, he didn't want to make any mistakes.

He also wanted to explore Garn's versatility. He could visualize himself as the sole proprietor of a glittering, tax-free hoard of gold, silver, diamonds and platinum, and for the first time in months he felt blissfully contented with himself.

When Jennings descended to the basement that evening, he found that Garn had furnished the space before his door with two quaint, circular divans and a mysterious looking cabinet. To Jennings this was a promising development—Garn evidently expected and desired human companionship.

Garn's "Oh hell" sounded almost affectionate, and he ceremoniously invited Jennings to seat himself, and from the cabinet he poured drinks in crystal-clear tumblers that somehow seemed to be metallic. The liquid tasted like overly-sweetened fruit juice of an unknown variety.

Jennings had spared uncertainly with Garn's limited English for a half hour when the basement door opened, and Christine flounced down the steps. At the bottom she stopped, and looked intently at Garn. "Say," she exclaimed, "you're *big!*"

"Oh hell," Garn said politely.

Jennings watched Garn apprehensively. He'd seen men spring to their feet and gape with tongues hanging out when Christine came unexpectedly into a room. Completely unperturbed, Garn casually poured Christine a drink and waved her to a seat. He disappeared into his own quarters, and returned with a seat for himself.

Conversation lagged. Garn looked inquiringly from one of them to the other. Christine sat Indian-fashion on the divan and studied Garn with a calculating boldness.

"Why," she said, "he has beautiful hair. And his eyes are like a cat's."

"Cat's?" Garn said.

"Small domestic animal," Jennings said.

"Domestic..."

Jennings impatiently waved the question away. "Not important," he said.

Christine shifted her position, artfully exposing a sensuously tapered leg. "It is too important," she said. "Look at his eyes—they're yellow!"

Cold anger clutched at Jennings. "Get out of here," he growled. "Get out of here right now!"

He waited for an explosion, but Christine meekly slid to her feet and flounced back up the stairway. Garn seemed as oblivious to her departure as he had been to her presence.

Jennings jingled the coins in his pocket, and decided to postpone business until the next morning. He finished his drink, had an awkward exchange of good-nights with Garn, and plodded back up the stairway. In the kitchen, he met Christine.

She wore only a sweeping, transparent negligee. She had applied her heavy makeup with artful precision, and her eyes glittered fiendishly. As Jennings faltered in amazement, she strode towards the basement door.

"My turn, now," she said wickedly.

"What are you up to?" Jennings demanded.

"What do you think?" she said. And as the door swung shut behind her, she called back, "It's nice, for a change, to have a *man* in the house!"

Jennings slumped into a chair, and stared glumly at the closed basement door. The murmur of voices from below was barely audible—except for an occasional, tinkling laugh from Christine. Suddenly a scream stabbed through the night, and Garn bellowed angerly. Jennings leaped to his feet and raced down the steps.

A FRIGHTENED Christine huddled on a divan. Garn had retreated to the far side of the basement, where he stood glaring murderously at her. He glanced appealingly at Jennings, and pointed a trembling finger. "Female?" he demanded.

Jennings swallowed hard. "Why, yes. Of course."

"Male . . . female . . . same..." Garn gestured. "Same...house?"

"Why, certainly," Jennings said. "She's my wife."

Garn took two steps forward, and scrutinized Christine. "Female?" he said again.

"Of course she's a female. What did you think she was?"

"Look...male," Garn announced.

Christine leaped to her feet with a snarl of rage. "I'll show you I'm no male!" she shouted. She ripped off the negligee and stood before them in triumphant nudeness.

Garn shook his head. "Look . . . male." he said.

"You thought she was a male?" the amazed Jennings exclaimed.

"Zo—yes," Garn said. He moved towards Christine, walked completely around her, studying her nude form bewilderedly, and returned to Jennings. "Male . . . female . . . same house . . ." Garn shuddered, and turned away.

They watched dumbfounded as he carried his belongings back to the garage. Fabulous objects and oddly shaped pieces of furniture disappeared up the stairway. Finally Garn came for the furnishings he had placed in the basement, and he unceremoniously shoved Christine from the divan. He paused to take a friendly grip on Jennings' shoulder.

"Go," he said, a touch of sadness in his voice. "Must . . . go. Male . . . female . . . same house . . ." He shook his head, and muttered something that sounded not unremotely like *barbarians*.

At the foot of the stairway he paused for a last, bewildered glance at Christine. "Look . . . male," he said.

A few moments later the time machine erupted with an explosive shriek that rattled the house and broke windows.

Jennings walked slowly up the stairs, examined a crack in the kitchen ceiling, and went out to look at the garage. The concrete floor was shattered, and still smouldering.

"Left in a hurry," Jennings observed ruefully.

He descended to the basement again, and went to inspect the empty sub-basement room Garn had fashioned for himself. Back in the basement, he looked at Christine where she lay sobbing on the concrete floor, and he laughed gleefully. It might have been worse. He was still broke, of course, but when Christine finally got around to divorcing him, she'd get next to nothing for alimony. And he had the best atomic bomb shelter in seven states.

"Just what do you suppose women will look like in the year 6000?" he said.

Christine's snarl was unintelligible, but the meaning was plain enough. As far as she was concerned, he could go there and find out for himself.

THE END

—Continued from other side

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